FIVE ADVENTURES
of
JIYON JANA



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WHEN JIYON JANA WENT TO HYENAHANA



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Jiyon Jana from Khulna, a government contractor who built roads, bridges, culverts, viaducts and sometimes buildings, had set aside an entire Sunday to study and respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) announcement from the Public Works Department (PWD). This job was in the famed tiger-roaming, vast jungles of the Sundarbans, spanning the myriad mouths of the Ganges on the Bay of Bengal. The job site was in an area directly south of Khulna. Spread out before Jiyon were all kinds of books, maps, charts, blank paper and pen and his Corona typewriter – ready with a fresh two-color ribbon. He had got a supply of the regulation Foolscap paper and a sheaf of carbon paper. He had put off this task long enough. To meet the submission deadline, he would have to finish typing the final version of his proposal – the Tender – by the end of the day today. Early tomorrow he would hand-deliver the Tender to the PWD Office in Khulna. So he was now deep in the middle of his deliberations. His loving wife knew not to disturb him at such times, but to keep him supplied with cups of hot tea.

Jiyon liked jobs that involved high adventure and great challenge, but this was not just because of his own outdoorsy temperament. Such jobs had less competition for them and yielded very high profit margins. So here his vocation and his avocation blended nicely. He had two trusted, long-time lieutenants – both adventure-loving rugged men. Longjam Shantikumar was a combination of the driver of his flat-nose Fifteen-hundredweight truck (or lorry as such workhorses were called) and a general factotum. Basrat Ali served as his manager and the foreman of the labor force. The laborers themselves were of course procured locally for each job, so that Jiyon did not maintain a standing labor force.

As Jiyon studied the proposal, increasingly he regretted not attending to this sooner and not having made a site visit. The site was described in the RFP, along with a map. It was right on the ocean, the Bay of Bengal and at the tip of a long finger that extended from the mainland into the ocean. The shoreline was a dense expanse of mangrove, followed by a marshy tract of land for about a quarter mile inland and then the solid landmass which was a dense jungle. The jungle extended about two miles inland before the flat, clear expanse of land began. About a half a mile from the edge of the jungle there was the first habitation, a small village called Sapnashayor. The road from Khulna and the other townships in the north ran south into the finger and after a while became an unpaved road. It passed through Sapnashayor and ended at the edge of the jungle. The proposal was for building a jeepable road that continued from here through the jungle, over the marshland, through the mangrove, to an

elevated ocean platform with a livable watchtower built on it. The section of the road through the jungle was to be a gravel-and-dirt road and the one through the marsh made of sturdy wooden planks on supporting structure anchored to solid earth. The section through the mangrove was to be similar to this, but elevated on piles driven into the ocean floor. The RFP said this was to be an ocean research outpost, but there could be little doubt that this was a cover story. This was surely to be a military watch post. In the early nineteen forties, the time of this story, Bay of Bengal was a militarily sensitive area.

The mangrove, the marshland and the jungle here constituted an area that was locally referred to as Hyenahana. Hyena means hyena and hana means raid. So the name would translate to The Place the Hyenas Raid! Most interesting name, thought Jiyon. He also noted that the name of the village, Sapnashayor, meant The Dream Lake. Jiyon repeated to himself out loud: "Sapnashyor, Hyenahana." The people of East Bengal had quite a poetic flair for naming places, he thought appreciatively. As he thought such thoughts, somewhere in the back in his mind, he slowly started developing a fascination for this unseen and unknown milieu.

When Jiyon prepared a budget to bid on a job, he had a special mental exercise he went through. He lay down in bed, closed his eyes and imagined the entire job taking place right before his eyes, in the minutest detail. As he did so, he made a mental list of every single need that came to mind along the way. This way, he minimized later regrets. Any omissions in pricing out the job would mean that the extra money would have to come from his profit. Any omissions in what equipment to bring to the remote site would mean lost time. The same was true for any failures to arrange for supplies ahead of time. By about 3 pm Jiyon was done with his detailed budget and a rough outline of the proposal, for which there was a set format. So he felt comfortable. Two things remained: To go over the plan with his lieutenants; and to type up the final version – which he would do himself.

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Longjam and Basrat arrived promptly at 4 pm as requested. Basrat Ali as always was dressed in his trademark plaid lungi and a knee-length white collarless cotton shirt. So familiar had this attire become in Khulna that people could tell from a great distance that it was him. The three sat in Jiyon's office which was just the front room of his residence. Mrs. Jana served tea and homemade samosas, with a side serving of tamarind-chili sauce. As the two visitors were enjoying these most appreciatively,

Jiyon went over the whole plan in great detail. The lieutenants listened in complete silence as they always did. After the presentation was finished, Jiyon first looked at Basrat. The latter raised a few points and Jiyon made some changes accordingly. Then he looked questioningly at Longjam. The latter gave a slight nod. He was a man of few words. Of Manipuri descent, he could easily pass for a tall Chinese by his looks. And his face was completely inscrutable. But Jiyon knew that when Longjam nodded, it meant that he had carefully considered everything and only then had agreed. A nod from him was as reassuring as several emphatic sentences from someone else.

After the session was over Jiyon asked: "I know you are in agreement with me, but how do you feel generally about this job?"

"It should be most interesting," said Basrat. Longjam nodded his concurrence.

Promptly at 10 am next morning when the PWD office opened for business, Jiyon entered the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) whom he knew slightly. The SDO received his sealed bid and asked one of his staff members to prepare a receipt. Then he said: "While they are making you the receipt, please have a cup of tea with me."

The SDO was a young fellow, a 'city man' from Calcutta who took this job right out of the engineering college. He was brought up on a steady diet of adventure and mystery stories and fancied himself the hero of such stories. He was fascinated by the Sundarbans and pounced on a chance to work here. His own jurisdiction now included a big chunk of the terrifyingly beautiful forest.

As they were sipping tea, he asked Jiyon: "Have you visited Hyenahana?"

"Actually, no. I could not find the time. Why, was it essential to make a site visit?"

"Would have been a good idea. At any rate, no point looking back now. You know, men like you – you all take things in your stride. And yet you are the most extraordinary men in a most unknown corner of the world. To me you are some of the greatest adventurers. There are so many people in the world that would like to have your life which you take to be an everyday affair."

Jiyon smiled: "It has its moments."

"Well, what has been the most interesting moment thus far?"

Jiyon thought a little and said: “That would have to be when that sadhu entered the Sundarbans, looking for the mind of the forest. But that is a long story and in any case most everyone would find it unbelievable.”

“Unbelievable how?”

“Well, when you work all the time up in the hills or down by the rivers or deep in the jungle, you see and know and feel things that may not all be logical or rational. ‘Men like me’ – as you put it – we take them as they come and not analyze them too much. That is, we are sometimes content to let the mystery be.”

“Mr. Jana, I would not be here if I did not have a sense of wonderment. I would be a Calcutta Babu working in an engineering firm in a concrete building in Chowringhee. So count me as a receptive audience. But you say it is a long story. Please, if you can spare the time, I will make time. Tell me the story.”

Jiyon was feeling very relieved this morning, having successfully met the deadline. He had no pressing business. And he saw that the friendship of the SDO would stand him in good stead later. So, as he made himself comfortable in his chair, he said: “All right then. I will.”

The SDO immediately called his orderly and asked for another round of tea, adding: “Go to the snack shop across the street and bring two plates of freshly made pakoras, with extra serving of tamarind sauce.”

Jiyon then launched upon his story, taking encouragement from the rapt attention on the face of his listener. That expression was gradually replaced by wonderment and awe as the story unfolded, but there was no sign of the disbelief Jiyon had anticipated.

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Following this, Jiyon had an extremely busy month. But from time to time he thought about Sapnashayor and Hyenahana. These names had begun to work on his mind as some kind of a mystical and distant attraction. At the same time, a sense of disappointment came over him. He feared that he might have grossly overbid on the job. It might slip out of his hand.

So it was with considerable surprise and pleasure that, on a Monday morning, he received word that he had been awarded the job. He told his assistants that the three of them would drive down in the Jeep to the site and make a preliminary assessment

of the situation. There was a great deal of advance planning to be done before actually starting on the job.

They set out before dawn on Wednesday. It was an easy drive up to a point until they were on unpaved road when the vehicle had to slow down considerably. Eventually they passed through the last town on this road and a series of closely spaced villages and then to a vast tract of open flat space. After a while they could see the tree line of the jungle in the distance. They passed through a small isolated village which clearly had to be Sapnashayor. They saw a small, nondescript pond in the village – the poetic 'lake.' There was just one general store next to the street. Next to it there sat a street vendor frying luchis, right there, out in the open. Next to the wok for frying luchis, there was some type of a curry kept bubbling in a cauldron with a low fire under it. Basrat's eyes lit up. He was a food lover and a sight such as this always caused him to salivate. Jiyon noticed Basrat's interest and said he had plans to stop in the village and make inquiries about recruiting a labor force. They would do it on the way back.

At length they arrived at the edge of the jungle and parked the vehicle. They picked up whatever implements they needed – tape measure, stakes, marking paint, colored strings etc – and headed into the jungle. The PWD had planted their own stakes to mark out the approximate layout of the new road. As they followed these now, they quickly found themselves in the middle of a nearly impenetrable jungle. But this did not faze the three men at all. They proceeded systematically by marking which trees needed to be felled. A suitable area was found for setting up camp. Thus the job had already commenced in right earnest.

In about two hours they were at the edge of the marshland and could see the mangrove forest and the Bay of Bengal beyond. From where they stood now the road they would build would be perfectly straight. So their survey work was over, for now. Jiyon sat under a tree and made several comments in his notebook as to the site. Longjam went further along the edge of the marshland to see if there was anything of interest. Basrat kept looking at the canopy of the jungle where he had spotted a large black monkey frolicking.

It appeared that the monkey had spotted them also and was putting on some acrobatics for their benefit. Suddenly, without any warning, it jumped from a low branch onto Basrat's left shoulder. The latter nearly fell over, but regained his balance. He resumed his posture of good humor as the monkey moved from shoulder

to shoulder, wrapped itself around his head and mussed up his hair. As soon as Jiyon lifted his head from his notebook and saw this, he called out sharply to Basrat: “Better not!” Basrat then shoved the monkey off him. For a moment, the monkey turned its head and looked at Jiyon. It was a most vicious and hateful look, Jiyon thought, or imagined. But he noted at the same time that the animal had a strange feature: a cleft upper lip which made its face look even more vicious. The monkey fled into the canopy and disappeared. Longjam came back and said he had seen the ‘monkey attack’ from a distance. The three then joked about how they just had their first brush with the local wildlife.

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On the way back they stopped at the general store in Sapnashayor. Jiyon asked if the village had a Headman, sometimes called a Morol. Indeed it had. He was called Wachhel Mollah. The shopkeeper came out to the street and pointed to the Headman’s house, under a large mango tree on the far side of the shayor. The three had not eaten all day. So they now decided to have a bite before going to see the Headman.

Basrat made a beeline for the street vendor. Jiyon and Longjam opened the food pack prepared by Mrs. Jana. It had a stack of parothas smeared with pure ghee, a dry potato curry, hardboiled eggs and some sweets and fruits. This made for a delicious and substantial meal. As the two ate in the car, they watched in the distance Basrat wolfing down his meal with great gusto, asking for more luchis every few minutes. When he came back, he reported: “This was most delicious. The curry was meat ghoogni. Luchi and meat ghoogni make a wonderful combination.” Ghoogni, a spicy stew of garbanzo beans, was a popular dish but meat ghoogni – the same stew slow-cooked with chunks of goat meat – was indeed a novelty, especially when served by a street vendor. Basrat added: “But please don’t tell Bhabiji that I passed up on her box lunch!”

Fortunately, Wachhel Mollah was home. Jiyon introduced themselves and said: “Mollah Saheb, we have come to talk to you about the road construction job in Hyenahana.” So saying, Jiyon gave him a box of fine sweets he had brought from Khulna. The Mollah was greatly pleased and invited them in. He handed the sweets to his wife and asked her to make tea for the honored guests. Jiyon resumed: “I have won the contract to build the road and… ”

“What!” the Mollah exclaimed. “I thought you had come to ask about the jungle *before* bidding on the job – as indeed all the other contractors did. They all then decided not to bid.”

Greatly puzzled, Jiyon said: “Actually, I had put it off for so long that there was no time for a site visit prior to bidding. But why did the other contractors decide not to bid?”

“First, let me ask you: Do you know if there were many bidders on this job? Was there much competition?”

“Well, I have no way of knowing if there were other bidders. But now that you bring it up, it does seem that I may have been the only bidder.”

“I will have to tell you about the Legend of Hyenahana. Mind you, this is just a legend. I do not want to be spreading rumors that prevent the development of this area. I am telling you this for one reason only. I know the next thing you are going to ask is if you could recruit a labor force from the village. The answer is no. No one here will go into that jungle – not for any amount of money.”

Tea arrived. The three sat and listened in amazement and a rising sense of foreboding to the Legend of Hyenahana.



The Legend of Hyenahana

Nobody knows when the name Hyenahana was given to the area, but everyone hereabouts knows why this name was given. Legend has it that there had been periodic sightings of a group of black hyenas walking in a single file in the jungle, lead by a human with a very large head. The sighting always took place at night. Each sighting occurred after the disappearance of a person who went to the jungle for some reason – such as gathering firewood or looking for beehives. The man leading the hyenas would closely resemble this disappeared person, except for the head. The bodies of these men would be eventually found in the jungle but the cause of death would never be clear.

Hyenas were a common occurrence in the Sundarbans then, but no one had ever seen a black hyena. In Wachhel Mollah's thinking, if one were to try to give credence to the legend, one might think that these were very densely and darkly spotted hyenas that appeared black at night. As to the enlarged head, it could be some type of a headdress. But still, these explanations did not remove all the mystery. People from the village – except the most daredevil ones – avoided going to the jungle for any reason at all.

The last known episode – which was very real – occurred around sixty years ago when the Mollah was eight years old. That would put the occurrence at about 1880. He still has recollections of the commotion that followed the event. A young man of the village quarreled with his new wife and left home in a huff, saying he would go live in Hyenahana. People actually saw him entering the jungle in the early evening. When he did not return by late next day his father – who lived separately in another house – was informed. This man loved his son dearly and immediately took off to look for him. He did not care about the danger to himself, but was only concerned that his son was alone and forlorn in the dark – in a dangerous place.

The father came out of the jungle the following morning, alone and seeming to be in a daze. By that evening he had gained his composure and was able to relate what he saw in the jungle. After he looked for his son for several hours, calling out his name intermittently, he became tired and sat under a tree. This was in the middle of the night and he could hear all the usual jungle sounds. Suddenly there fell a very strange hush as if in preparation for something momentous happening. Then the father saw a man approaching from a distance. His posture seemed to be that of the son but the head was as large as a kalshi, the large water pail. No facial features could be seen in the dark. As the man neared, the father could see that he was leading a procession of a group of black hyenas, walking in single file. This procession then passed on in complete silence, coming as close as a hundred feet from him. The father was so immobilized by fear that he could not call out to his son, if that was who he was.

The father either fainted or fell asleep right there. It was morning when he woke up or came to. He started for the village. Halfway through the jungle he found his son's body. After he wept over the body for a long time, he examined it. There were no signs of anything wrong. It seemed perfectly normal except for some scratches around the neck area, resulted perhaps from brushing against tree branches.

The villagers went and recovered the body the next day and cremated it according to custom.



"So that is what stands behind the Legend of Hyenahana," said the Mollah. "But the villagers, by shunning the place as a place of great evil ever since, have given added substance to the fear factor. No one would agree to go work in the jungle today. And that is why, I think, your competitors decided not to bid. Not out of fear, but for practical reasons."

All the time the Mollah was telling the story, Jiyon saw Basrat fidget uncomfortably. Jiyon guessed what the reason might be. The street food Basrat ate did not agree with him. Indeed, Basrat now asked the Mollah somewhat sheepishly if he might be permitted to use the toilet facilities. The Mollah left to show him the place. Jiyon remarked to Longjam: "Might be the street food." Longjam nodded uncertainly.

As the three took leave of the Mollah, the latter said he would pass the word to more distant villages where people might be willing to work in the jungle. Jiyon thanked him and gave him a date and a time when any such willing laborers should gather at the entry point of Hyenahana, next to the road that ran through the village.

As they were walking back to the car Jiyon asked Basrat several questions. How was he feeling? What exactly was his discomfort? When did it start? Did he have an upset stomach? Jiyon felt Basrat's forehead with the palm of his hand. It felt warmer than usual. He then felt the pulse and found it was racing. As he felt the pulse, he also felt that Basrat was shivering uncontrollably. Jiyon now concluded that this matter needed attending to immediately and conferred with Longjam. The two agreed that the best course of action now was to drive straight back to Khulna and to Dr. Ahmed, Jiyon's family physician. Basrat lay down in the back of the Jeep, covered with a blanket that was always kept in the car. Jiyon asked Longjam to drive while he himself kept a close watch over Basrat. The expert lorry driver drove the Jeep as fast as he safely could. They were in Khulna in record time.

Fortunately, Dr. Ahmed was in his office. He set aside what he was doing and attended to Basrat who by now was not able to speak at all. The more Dr. Ahmed examined the patient the more the creases on his forehead deepened. At length he said: “This is not food poisoning. But what it is I cannot determine. I will give you a letter of referral to the Civil Hospital. Please take him there immediately.”

The two doctors at the Civil Hospital who examined Basrat were also considerably puzzled and sent word to the British Civil Surgeon Dr. O’Connell. He lived in quarters adjoining the hospital. The saheb came immediately and was briefed. He quickly took in the information and asked Jiyon and Longjam to follow him to his office. When they were there, seated, the doctor said: “Now tell me everything that happened from the time you left Khulna to the time the symptoms started. Do not leave out anything – no matter how unconnected it may seem to the illness.”

Jiyon gave a very detailed account until the doctor suddenly interrupted him sharply: “Monkey?! What monkey?!” Jiyon described the monkey episode in greater detail. “Oh my God!” exclaimed the doctor and rushed back to the patient. Jiyon and Longjam followed. They heard the saheb shout “We need to quarantine the patient immediately” as he entered the room. But then they saw the two doctors standing by Basrat’s bedside shake their heads from side to side. Basrat Ali had died.

Doctor O’Connell quickly put on gloves and removed Basrat’s clothes from the shoulder and the neck area. There, on the back of his neck, were a series of deep nail scratches. The skin had been broken through and blood was visible.

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Jiyon and Longjam participated in all that followed a death: Consoling of the family, the administering of the last rites, the burial of the dead. Their hearts were heavy. But even as a pall descended on everything, Jiyon had to attend to the job at hand. There was no time to lose. Therefore he turned his attention back to it.

He now had a dilemma. With that disease-carrying monkey (or monkeys) loose in the jungle, any labor force he gathered there would be at peril. But then again, perilous jobs are what he specialized in. Danger was inherent in these jobs and deaths were not uncommon. If he backed out of this job – which he probably could, given the circumstances – this would be a strike against him in his future bids. Jiyon discussed these thoughts with Longjam. He knew that the quiet man would come out with the exact solution as he always did.

Longjam listened to all the considerations Jiyon outlined, thought for a moment and said: “Boss Babu, this project is clearly a military job. You could ask for a couple of armed soldiers to protect us.” Why didn’t I think of that, wondered Jiyon. He then went to visit the young SDO and told him the whole story. The SDO listened with exactly the same attentiveness with which had listened the other day. Jiyon then said that because of the danger, he had been wondering whether to proceed with the job. The SDO said that if Jiyon wanted to back out of the contract, the former would see to it that this was done without Jiyon incurring any penalties. On the other hand, said the SDO, this was a very important job and he would do anything to help if Jiyon wanted to proceed. Jiyon marveled at the young man’s professionalism. He offered the suggestion of soldiers armed with shotguns to scare away any monkeys. “Consider it done,” said the SDO, without any explanations as to how a SDO of the PWD could get his hands on soldiers of the British India army. Jiyon gave him the exact date he would set up camp in Hyenahana, the day when the soldiers should report.

Having made the decision to proceed, the first thing Jiyon did was to offer Basrat’s job to his younger brother Muniar Ali. Muniar was every bit as able as Basrat and was now at loose ends. He eagerly accepted. Next Jiyon sat down and designed the watchtower. As far as possible every component for it – the wood beams, the framed glass observation windows all around, the furniture etc – would be pre-made in town. The tower would be assembled from these at the site. He placed the orders for the components and got promise of delivery in one month. Jiyon then found Rasiklal, a man that had often worked for him as a camp cook. It turned out that he would be available for the entire period of the job.

In preparation for the trip Jiyon got out his shotgun as he always did. He also packed two boxes of buckshot cartridges. The shotgun would be placed in charge of Longjam. Jiyon himself had a six-chamber Webley revolver that he always carried on his jobs. It was kept in a buttoned canvas holster and he wore to one side of his belt – slightly to the front. Because of the danger involved in his jobs, he was given a rare license for a civilian to purchase and carry a revolver. He now cleaned it and oiled it.

Jiyon, Longjam and Muniar now got busy loading the lorry efficiently for their trip to Hyenahana in two days. They were on schedule. Jiyon hoped that Wachhel Mollah had some success finding laborers from the other villages and that they would meet him at the entry point to the jungle when he arrived there.

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Jiyon drove the Jeep and Longjam the fully laden Fifteen-hundredweight. Muniar and Rasiklal rode with Longjam in the cab of the lorry. As they were arriving at the entry to the jungle, Jiyon saw, to his great relief, several men sitting around on the ground. He counted ten and they all looked young, sturdy and sinewy. They all wore the same blue-color lungi and no shirt. As Jiyon stopped the vehicle, one of the men approached him and said: “Babu, my name is Bhat. We understand that you are looking for a labor force. There are ten of us who would like to work for you if we can agree on a price.”

Jiyon had been figuring on hiring about a dozen people. But these men looked hardier than average. So ten would do. He asked all the men to stand round and explained in great detail what the job would entail, from the beginning to the end. It would be for a period of two months and the men would live in tents during this entire period. There would be long hours. Food would be provided – good and plentiful food. Tea and snacks would be available round-the-clock. There would be dangers inherent in a jungle – both known and unknown – but there would also be two armed soldiers to protect them. Could they handle the job?

The men talked among themselves for a few minutes. Then Bhat came back and said they would like the job. Jiyon asked what their salary expectation was. Bhat gave him a figure that was about in the middle of the range Jiyon had in mind. An agreement was reached.

About this time, a military vehicle pulled up and dropped off two soldiers. They carried knapsacks and shotguns. Jiyon greeted them and introduced them to the others. The party was complete. A smooth and propitious start, Jiyon told himself.

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About half a mile into the jungle and right next to the planned road was a natural clearing. This is where the tents were pitched. There was one large tent for the ten laborers and one to sleep Longjam, Muniar, Rasiklal and the two soldiers. There was a small tent for Jiyon. Finally, an open tarpaulin covered area was set up to serve as the kitchen as well as the dining and the general gathering area. Rasiklal got busy making a welcoming round of tea, accompanied by jilipis and samosas that they bought on the way down here.

The work started in right earnest and proceeded at a good pace. The men needed little supervision. They had a good grasp of what needed to be done and went about it silently. They could use a two-man logging saw with as much facility as they could operate a pile driver. Even though the temperature in the jungle varied, they seemed to like to have on nothing but the lungis. Asked about this, they told Jiyon that they had become long accustomed to the coastal climate here.

Since the laborers did not need much supervising Muniar decided to work alongside them, making the job go even faster. In a few days life fell into a smooth routine. This became a world unto itself, completely cutoff from the outside world. The lorry periodically went to the towns to fetch supplies. Other than this, there were no outside signs that such a large project was going on here. Occasionally Jiyon had to go back to Khulna to attend to various matters and to see his family. The soldiers took turns round-the-clock to watch the canopy, but there were no monkeys at all to be seen. At night they used the intense beam of a five-battery torchlight to survey the canopy.

There developed a family feeling among the inhabitants of this isolated mini-world. Even though the ten men were not much at conversation, they were quite sociable and amicable. One of the soldiers had traveled far and wide and regaled the group with stories in the evening. Occasionally, Rasiklal sang some atmospheric bhatiali songs, country songs about life in the riverine delta. The sound of the song airily reverberated in the jungle and created a magic environment. Indeed the whole existence here became a magic.

They saw no wildlife other than the birds, the whole time. There were no signs of any monkeys. When they worked in water, they saw no crocodiles or snakes. The theory was discussed that the noise surrounding the construction activity had chased all the animals away for the time being. A couple of times at night Jiyon thought he saw two eyes glaring from the canopy. He borrowed the five-battery torchlight and scanned the area. Nothing could be seen.

With the construction of the round, glass-enclosed watchtower that stood at the end of the pier that extended past the mangroves clear into the ocean, the project was completed. Jiyon observed with satisfaction that this was a most difficult job executed with great quality and efficiency. He and several others got into the Jeep and made the inaugural drive over the new road from the edge of the jungle all the way to the

watchtower. No problems whatsoever. The wooden section of the road on piles did not even groan under the weight of the Jeep.

The following day was the last full day, set aside to tidy up things and pack up for the return trip. Jiyon planned a sumptuous celebration feast for that evening. One whole chicken per person would be roasted on open fire, along with onions and peppers. There would be goat-meat pulau, tomato-and-cucumber salad and sweets. Whoever wanted would get a bottle of beer. All ten men wanted. Jiyon told the soldiers that their duty could now be considered ended. So they opted for beer also. In the morning of this last day, Longjam and Rasiklal took the Jeep to the nearest town with the shopping list.

The partying went deep into the night. Longjam, Muniar and Rasiklal then retired into their tent, followed by the two soldiers. The ten laborers, fully sated, were still sipping their beer. One by one they fell asleep right there on the ground, around the campfire. The fire had died down and the cinders glowed red from under a thin layer of gray ash.

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Jiyon was a teetotaler – he neither smoked nor drank. But now he sat enjoying, in a reflected sense, the warm pleasure the ten men had enjoyed after great feasting and great inebriation. He was sitting on the ground just outside the tarpaulin shed, with his back resting against a large tree trunk. He took his last sip from the mug of tea and set it aside. He felt a little sleepy but did not want to go into his tent, leaving these ten men in deep slumber, completely unguarded. He now looked at them again. They were all spread out on the ground haphazardly, wearing nothing but the blue lungis. The rugged, sinewy men now looked very vulnerable in their sleep.

These thoughts caused Jiyon to gradually wax philosophical. He now started to think about the human condition in general and his own life in particular. The words of the SDO came to mind. Indeed he often lost sight of the fact that he was after all a consummate adventurer. All the jungle sounds – the crickets, the cicadas and the rest – helped condense this reflective mood of his. Gradually the sights before him, the sounds in his ears and the thoughts in his mind all blended to become a single, amorphous experience.

And then he was suddenly awakened from this nighttime reverie. Not by any rude sound or a sudden gust of wind but simply from the fact that all sounds and all

movements had suddenly stopped. Stopped completely and emphatically. It was as though the jungle froze from some premonition. It was as though it held its breath in the dark expectation of some coming. Jiyon felt a chill rise up his spine. He realized that he was nearly paralyzed with fear. All he could do was to move his right hand – ever so gingerly – to his holster and unbutton it. He then pulled out his revolver and cocked it. He realized that if these sleeping men needed protecting from whatever evil was converging on them, then Jiyon was the one who would have to provide it. There was no time to, or he did not find the strength to, awaken the others sleeping in their tent.

Time kept ticking by. The strange lull held, but nothing happened. After about fifteen minutes Jiyon recovered his composure and stood up. He considered waking the soldiers, but decided against it. The lull clearly was just a natural occurrence. It could even be a tiger in the vicinity that caused general alarm among the fauna. Jiyon walked all the way around the camp once and, satisfied that nothing was amiss, resumed his seat. He eased the hammer back on the revolver and laid it on the ground next to him.

He dozed off. At the small hours of night, a slight rustling of fallen leaves on the ground alerted him to something approaching. He surveyed the jungle all around him while trying to bring himself to full alertness. And then he saw. Straight out of jungle and directly to his right, a human figure had stepped into the clearing of the camp site and was now approaching. As it came closer, he saw the plaid lungi and the long white collarless shirt. But the head was enormously large. Jiyon, petrified with fear, still tried to strain his eyes to look at the facial features. Now, even in the faint moonlight, he could see that it was not a large head. A very large, dark-colored monkey had wrapped itself around the head of Basrat Ali.

The figure stopped approaching and then turned as if to go. But it stopped in that position. At that point Jiyon picked up his gun. The feel of the cold, heavy metal in his hand made him feel less afraid. He ran his eyes over the sleeping men. They were still fast asleep. Presently, however, one of them stirred slightly. Then, in one continuous fluid motion he got up on all fours and at the same time, transformed into a dark hyena. The lungi came loose and fell off. He then walked towards Basrat and stood behind him. One by one, the others did the same, until a long procession was formed: Basrat at the head, with the ten hyenas following him in a single file – silently. The procession started to move into the jungle. Jiyon watched this from a

state of complete paralysis. Even after the last hyena disappeared from view, he sat in that state for a long time.

At last he got up. He picked up the ten lungis and made a bundle. He went to the tent where the ten men slept, gathered their paltry belongings and hid them in the jungle along with the bundle. He now sat down again. There was a lot to think through. This was not a story he could tell everybody. He had to develop a cover story for public consumption.

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The day broke on Jiyon like a luminous blessing. Never had the first crimson of the sun been more revitalizing to him. Slowly the people in the other tent awoke and came out one by one. Jiyon waited till everyone was there. Then he said: “The men decided to have an early start. They will walk five miles to a village where they can catch the first bus out.”

That was a perfectly natural explanation and nobody pursued the matter. Only Rasiklal said: “They were a fine bunch.” After a quick round of tea and bread they started striking tent. It was done efficiently as always and in about an hour, the party was ready to leave. The two soldiers would wait for the military van to come and pick them up. Muniar and Rasiklal would ride with Longjam in the lorry. Jiyon would drive the Jeep home. Jiyon told Longjam that, if the lorry got home first, Longjam should wait for Jiyon’s arrival. There was something that needed to be discussed.

When everyone had left, Jiyon thought he would drive to the watchtower for one last look. He wanted to see the vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal before him by the calm morning light. He felt a slight chill and buttoned his air force-style heavy leather jacket right up to his chin. He then instinctively made certain that the waistband of the jacket did not obstruct his holster. He parked the Jeep next to the tower and climbed up the ladder. The cabin of the tower was about ten feet above the pier. Access was provided by a ladder and a trapdoor in the floor of the cabin. Once in the round cabin one was surrounded by glass windows all around, commanding a spectacular 360-degree view. With a telescope and a binocular one could effectively watch the shipping activity over a very large area of the ocean in this highly strategic area.

Jiyon lifted the trapdoor and put his head into the brilliantly lit cabin. There, in one corner, was seated a huge, dark-colored monkey with a cleft upper lip. It had a most

malignant look in its eyes. As soon as it saw Jiyon's head, it pounced and wrapped itself around his head. But this time Jiyon did not lose any time. He cocked his revolver even as he pulled it out. He felt the monkey mussing up his hair and scratching his neck. He pressed the barrel of the gun against the monkey just behind his own neck and fired. The report of the .455 Webley was deafening, drowning the scream of the monkey which fell through the trapdoor onto the pier. It then scurried away through the mangrove, leaving a long trail of blood.

Jiyon felt dizzy and confused. He touched his face and saw blood on his hand. He realized what had happened. So that was how it was all to end for the great adventurer. His end had come, just like Basrat's. There was no cure and so there was no point running for help. Slowly and deliberately, he climbed into the back of the Jeep. He lay down, wrapping himself in the blanket in exactly the same posture as Basrat the other time. He now waited for blessed death. His mind went blank – it could not support any thoughts anymore.

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Jiyon felt someone vigorously shaking him by the shoulders and shouting: "Boss Babu, wake up! Wake up!" Longjam had not started his trip immediately. He had to rearrange and secure the load in the back of his lorry. Just as he finished, he heard the loud report of the revolver. He turned the vehicle around and drove to where the gravel road ended. The lorry could not be driven on the planks. So Longjam picked up the shotgun and ran the rest of the way. The others kept watch at the lorry. When Longjam got here, he found Jiyon in this state.

Jiyon explained to him feebly what had happened and said that there was no point now in trying to save him. They should go on and come back the next day to take care of his body. Even as Longjam was listening to this, he was wiping Jiyon's face with his handkerchief which he had wetted in the ocean water. He examined Jiyon's face and neck area carefully. Then he said: "Boss Babu, this is all monkey blood. The scratches you heard are on the back of your leather jacket which has saved your life. You felt disoriented because you fired the gun so close to your ear. You'll feel normal in a little bit."

Longjam knew that Jiyon kept a bottle of Dettol in his shaving kit. He now got the bottle out and daubed Jiyon's face and neck with the disinfecting liquid. The strong smell revived Jiyon. He was nearly back to normal. Longjam noted that Jiyon had not

shaved for a few days. Good, that would mean that there were no fresh nicks or cuts on his face through which the monkey virus could enter.

Jiyon told Longjam he felt fine to drive now. The two of them washed the monkey blood as well as they could off the ladder and the pier and sprinkled the area with Dettol. Jiyon, not deterred in the least by all that had transpired, climbed right back up into the cabin to see the view he came to see. Then they were off.

Longjam got on the front passenger seat of the Jeep. Jiyon noticed that Longjam checked the breech of the shotgun to see that there were two buckshot cartridges, took the safety off and held the gun in a firing stance.

When they met the rest of the party at the lorry Jiyon said he would drive on ahead and the lorry should come at its own pace. But Longjam insisted that the two vehicles travel in tandem. Jiyon needed to be kept under observation.

As the vehicles were passing Sapnashayor, Jiyon saw Wachhel Mollah standing in front of the general store. He stopped momentarily to greet the Mollah, saying that they had finished the job and were leaving. The Mollah congratulated him and added that he was sorry he could not procure a labor force for Jiyon. He asked if Jiyon eventually had to bring the laborers all the way from Khulna. Jiyon gave an ambiguous nod and took the Mollah's leave.

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After the vehicles arrived at Jiyon's backyard, the staging area, they were unloaded and the tents and other things were put back in the shed. Jiyon told Muniar and Rasiklal they could go home now, but asked Longjam to stay.

The two men sat in Jiyon's office. Mrs. Jana asked if they would like tea and they thankfully accepted. Jiyon chitchatted with Longjam until the tea arrived and then closed the door. He then related in the greatest detail everything that happened the previous night, ending with the conversation he just had with Wachhel Mollah. "So these men were not sent to us by the Mollah as we had thought," he said and looked at Longjam with a nod that meant he had finished what he had to say.

Longjam's face betrayed no emotions whatsoever. But it was clear he was thinking. Jiyon felt encouraged. Longjam would get him out of this seemingly impossible situation. He realized that the truth could not be told to anyone. But that would mean that ten men went inexplicably missing while in his employ – men whom he had not

paid the final payment for the services. This would be a serious police matter. And their belongings, along with their lungis, would be found stashed away in the jungle.

Longjam came through with a very clear solution that implied a possibility that had not occurred to Jiyon: “There is no police matter unless these men actually lived in flesh and blood. Boss Babu, let’s go to their village Moynamoti tomorrow and make some discreet inquiries.”

Overwhelmed by this sage advice, Jiyon said: “Longjam, thank you for not doubting me on this story. I myself would have found this difficult to believe if I were in your place.”

Longjam asked: “Was there anything about today’s monkey that identified it as the one that attacked Basrat?”

“Yes indeed. It had a cleft upper lip.”

Longjam gave a long verbal response: “When we were returning from the watchtower, when you went inside the cabin for your final look, I saw the large black monkey with cleft upper lip sitting atop the tower, wrapping itself round the spire. It looked perfectly healthy as if nothing had happened to it. That monkey which you had just shot to pieces at close range with a .455-caliber bullet and whose blood we washed off from every place, was perfectly fine. And there was a most vicious look in its eyes.”

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The full names of the ten men were written in Jiyon’s workbook, as well as the village they came from. He rewrote the names on a single sheet of paper in large letters. As he wrote them out, something odd about the collection of names struck him. But he set that thought aside.

As they drove into Moynamoti, they saw a central thatched cottage where people were milling about. They walked over there and found that the place was a combination of many things: the village council, the post office, the tea shop, the grocery store etc. They made a beeline for the oldest-looking man sitting alone at the counter marked Post Office. Jiyon said: “I am a contractor looking to recruit some laborers. Someone gave me the names ten men in this village who might be available. Would you help me locate them?”

The man took the list and read it from the beginning to the end. He said: “I do not know a single one of these names. And I thought I knew everyone in this village. But to be doubly sure, please go down this lane a bit to the masjid. The groundskeeper there definitely knows everyone in the village.”

The groundskeeper was a man who looked to be in his nineties. He said he could not read. Jiyon then read the names out loud to him. As he read, that same thought he had when he wrote them down came back to him. But now the groundskeeper verbalized that thought for him: “There are no such persons in this village. And in any case, all those names sound like names of people from my father’s generation and before. Today’s youth do not have such names. I mean, Bhattarak Bhattashali, Iltutmis Salahuddin,…! Someone is pulling your leg, Babu!”

A great weight lifted from Jiyon’s mind. As Longjam had said, these men never existed in flesh and blood and so there was no fear of a missing-men investigation. At the same time his befuddlement increased greatly. At any rate, to celebrate the ending of the great anxiety, they stopped at a hotel in a town on the way back and treated themselves to a hearty lunch. While eating the appetizer course of pakoras, Jiyon remembered the SDO’s love for adventure stories from the Sundarbans. He felt a little sad that the SDO would never hear *this* story. Longjam would be first and the last person to hear this and he would never tell a soul.

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The following Monday was the day of the final inspection of the construction by a PWD overseer. Jiyon was to be present at the inspection. He and Longjam drove down and found that the overseer had just arrived. He had with him an Englishman who was introduced only as “Mr. Smith.” It was Mr. Smith who was doing the main inspecting, the overseer tagging along.

Anyway, Mr. Smith was enormously pleased. He assured Jiyon that the final payment for the job would be cleared immediately. Also, Mr. Jana could expect favorable consideration for similar jobs in the future. At one point, when Mr. Smith was out of earshot, Jiyon remarked to the overseer whom he knew well: “Mr. Smith does not much look like a military man. He looks like a businessman.” The overseer winked and whispered: “SIS.”

“Too bad I will never be able to tell anyone I did a job for the Secret Intelligence Service,” remarked Jiyon. As soon as he said it, it occurred to him that there was a great deal more about this job he would not be able to tell anyone, ever.

The men now shook hands and went their separate ways.

“Let us make one last visit to the Mollah,” said Jiyon as he pulled up into the village. Wachhel Mollah was home and greeted them. Jiyon apologized for disturbing him again and said: “Mollah Saheb, my son is writing a story for his school magazine and he has chosen to write about the Legend of Hyenahana. By any chance, do you remember the name of the young husband that disappeared sixty years ago?”

“I do indeed because it was such a memorable name: Bhattarak Bhattashali.”

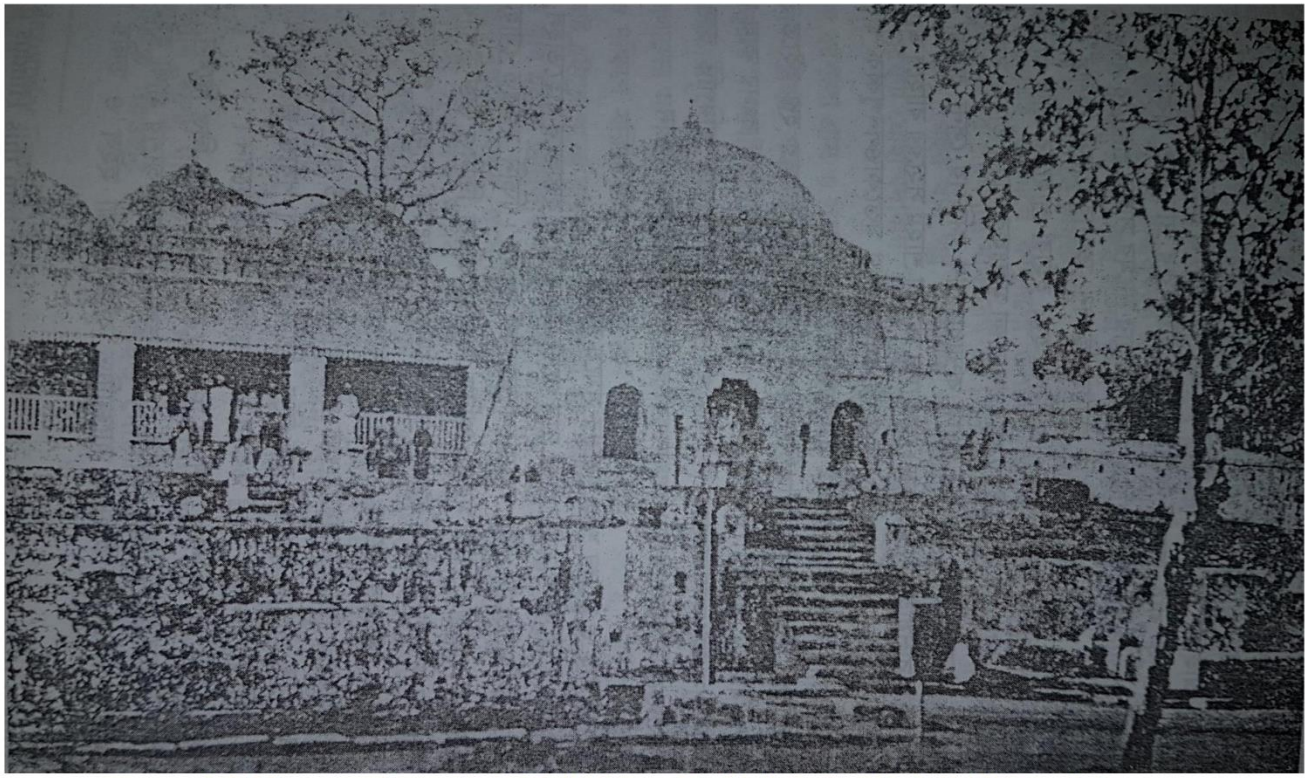
They said goodbye to the Mollah. As they were leaving, Longjam turned and, uncharacteristically of him, asked a question: “Mollah Saheb, was it known how many black hyenas were there then, before this Bhattashali went missing?”

“Nine.”

As Jiyon and Longjam got back into the Jeep, the latter allowed himself four more words: “The legend keeps growing.”



THE BURIAL WALL OF RABI' UL-AWWAL



A 1900s scene from Shah Jalal's Dargah in Sylhet, Bangladesh (Wikipedia)

جدار دفن ربيع الأول

In the late morning of the New Year's Day of 1943, Jiyon Jana sat in his office reading the newspaper and sipping tea. The office was just the front portion of his home. The office porch was fronted by a large grassy field that separated the house from the paved main road. Between the road and the field was a drainage creek. Access to the house from the road was provided by a wide culvert with concrete parapets. The culvert was strong enough to stand Jiyon's truck which he used in his construction business and which was kept parked on one side of the field alongside his Willys Jeep.

At about 10 am Mrs. Jana stepped into the office from the inner sanctum and proceeded to ask Jiyon a question. But she stopped short as she saw something on the main road. Jiyon followed her gaze. A rickshaw had slowed down as if to ascertain if this was the house the passenger was looking for. Because of the sunshade of the rickshaw the Janas could not see the passenger. Then the rickshaw turned onto the culvert and the passenger was in full view. No sight could be more welcome! It was Jiyon's childhood friend Fazlul Rahman. He had traveled all the way from Sylhet to Khulna and had arrived by the early morning train. Jiyon noted with great pleasure that Fazlul had with him an overnight bag. So he would stay the night, at least.

Jiyon rushed out, followed by Mrs. Jana in her ladylike pace. The two men hugged and noisily exchanged pleasantries. Then Fazlul held Mrs. Jana's hands in his and said: "Bhabiji, nothing ever warms my heart more than the sight of you!" On that, Mrs. Jana replied: "The ever-gracious Rahman Saheb! Come in, come in. You are most welcome here and you must stay several days. My only complaint against you is that you did not bring Ayesha."

"Bhabiji, Jiyon, my Ayesha passed away last week. She had cancer and it did not give her much time."

What could one say after such most sudden, most saddening news. The Janas did not even know Ayesha was ill. The husband and wife awkwardly expressed their genuine sorrow which is always awkward to express. Not knowing what to say or do next, Mrs. Jana invited Fazlul to come and wash up from the long train journey.

Fazlul washed up and then he and Jiyon sat down in the office. Mrs. Jana went to see to the tea and to tone down the planned New Year's lunch menu. Rejoicing was not to be the order of the day. Out here in the office the two friends could not get a proper conversation going even though there was an infinite supply of accumulated

topics of common interest. They had not seen each other in over a year. They were both the same age, now twenty-eight.

As they talked disjointedly, Jiyon let Fazlul take the lead as to what he wanted to talk about. Presently Mrs. Jana reappeared with the maid in tow, carrying a tray with the accouterments of tea as well as two plates of sweets and salty snacks. She joined the men over tea. There was thus brought a woman's warmth into the proceedings.

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For nearly ten years, between the ages of five and fifteen, Jiyon lived in Sylhet. His family had a home that backed right on to the walled compound of Shahjalal's Darga, one of the holiest and most time-honored Moslem shrines in the area. In the next house the Rahmans lived, Fazlul being their only child. And in the house next to that lived the Mahsin family. Of the two children there, the elder boy Jamshed was about the same age as Jiyon and Fazlul. The daughter Suraiya was two years younger.

All three houses stood in the shadow of the Darga, literally and symbolically. Along the boundary wall of the Darga compound were large ancient trees that spread out to take these houses under their hallowed shade. The legendary droves of pigeons that made the Darga their home also spilled over onto these houses, marking them all over with their white droppings. But no one minded. The intruding pigeons were like the peace and the serenity of the Darga spilling over onto these homes. So it was that the inhabitants of the three homes lived in great harmony.

Of all the children Fazlul and Suraiya became the closest – nearly inseparable. They played together, walked together, talked together. The girl kept the boy on a short leash, imposing on him all kinds of disciplines. If Fazlul did something naughty – such as stealing mangoes or guavas from someone else's orchard – she would say: "Don't do this Fazlul. Khodaye bokbo – God will scold you!" And thus in time this "Khodaye bokbo" became the guiding stricture of Fazlul's life.

After leaving Sylhet the Jana family lived in various places until a grown-up Jiyon settled in Khulna, upon finishing his studies in Calcutta. But the whole time he kept in touch with the set in Sylhet – through letters and through occasional visits. Of course he and Fazlul were in Calcutta together as students and saw a lot of each other. It became quite clear to Jiyon that Fazlul and Suraiya were destined to be married, for it was unthinkable how these two could ever spend their lives apart.

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At about 11 am Mrs. Jana got up and said: “I will let you two chat away the next couple of hours. Lunch will be at one. And by the way, Rahman Saheb, if it is not too inappropriate, I will make the favorite dish that Ayesha liked to serve you – chana dal with coconut shavings and raisins, accompanied by eggplants fried in batter.”

“Never inappropriate from you, Bhabiji,” replied Fazlul as his face broke in a sad smile, tinged with fond remembrance.

As soon as Mrs. Jana was out of view Fazlul turned to Jiyon, the smile gone from his face: “Jiyon, you know how I always long to see you. But this time there is also a specific reason for my coming. I need a very great favor from you.”

“You have but to ask,” replied Jiyon.

“It is not so simple. Can we talk somewhere away from here? I am afraid it is a rather dark matter and I do not wish for any unhappiness to touch Bhabiji or this home, ever.”

“Don’t worry about such things. But a walk sounds like a good idea anyway. Let’s go in the woods by the river, just a short drive from here.”

As Jiyon went inside to change into his walking shoes, he found himself going over in his mind Fazlul’s life as he knew it.

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Fazlul’s father Zainul was a businessman who inherited the family’s highly profitable brick-manufacturing business. Additionally, the family had ancestral wealth from both Zainul’s side as well as his wife’s. Sadly, tragedy struck early in his life, the wife dying at childbirth. Zainul had to raise Fazlul alone, with the help of a nursemaid – as they had no close relatives to turn to. Fazlul’s father and mother had both been the only child.

One day when Fazlul was about twenty-five years old and a professor in the local college, the father sat the son down for a special talk. Such talks had so far always been about some family matter or family finances. Fazlul thought that this time it was different. It had to be about his marriage – for he was now of the marriageable age and people had been bringing proposals. So he prepared in his mind to state that he had decided to marry Suraiya. Although he and Suraiya had never talked about this explicitly, he now had no time to wait for that talk. His father was about to force the issue.

The father asked the son to walk with him in their substantial backyard under the shade of the ancient trees of the Darga. The ground was strewn with dried leaves that crunched at every footfall. Set back against the wall of the Darga were two tombs – one belonging to Fazlul's mother and the other belonging to the wife of a close friend of Zainul. Her name was Zuleikha. The friend had asked Zainul's permission to inter his wife in this sacred ground and Zainul had welcomed the idea.

Fazlul was studying in Calcutta when all this happened. He saw Zuleikha's tomb only after the fact. The plan was to make this into a private family graveyard. Within the family and in the entire neighborhood people had already started calling the boundary wall of the Darga in this location the Burial Wall. Next to these graves there was a breach in the wall that provided access to the Darga grounds. Neighbors going to the Darga would say: "Let's take a short-cut through the Burial Wall." Or at night people with certain fears would say: "Let us avoid the Burial Wall and take the long way."

Now the father spoke: "Son, I have brought you to the Burial Wall for a reason. There is an important matter I wanted to discuss in your mother's presence, if only a presence in spirit. And also in presence of Zuleikha. You have never met her or her husband Rasool Qureshi, but he is one of the two closest friends I have – as close as Humayun. The three of us have been friends ever since we were children. Let me first tell you about Rasool."

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As young boys in this very neighborhood of Sylhet, Zainul Rahman, Rasool Qureshi and Humayun Ali formed an inseparable threesome. In time the boys became youths and the youths found their own places in life. Zainul studied economics and took charge of the family business. Humayun – who always had strong spiritual and poetic tendencies – became a cleric and a Sufi mystic. He was today the greatly venerated Mollah Moulavi Humayun Ali. He lived only yards away from Zainul, in the Darga.

Rasool was never a very practical – or worldly-wise – man. He shared Humayun's spiritual tendencies and was a mystic at heart. Left to his own devices he would rather whirl himself into a religious trance. He had difficulty finding a means of livelihood in the real-life, everyday world. Through the contacts of the Moulavi he found the job of a madrassa teacher in Jowai – in the Jaintia Hills – and moved there. However, that madrassa had to close for lack of students. The Moulavi then used his

considerable influence to get Rasool the Headmaster's position at the madrassa in Srimangal. Here Rasool found a wife and the ensuing life of stability and peace. He was happy as a homesteader. But in his mind he still longed to sing the mystic songs, dance the Darvesh dance and soar to great spiritual heights. In short he had a powerful inner life.

Rasool and Zuleikha in course had a daughter named Ayesha. From the time she was a baby it was clear that she would grow to be a phenomenal beauty. She inherited her father's tall, slender and stately built and her mother's serene and mysterious beauty. Life was all happy for Rasool. But tragedy was not far.

When Ayesha was about seventeen, her mother Zuleikha was stricken with cancer. The Moulavi again used his influence to gather the best doctors in the province of East Bengal. He even saw to it that a doctor from Calcutta reviewed the treatment program. But all these experts were no match for the disease. They gave Zuleikha one year at the most. A pall fell over the family and the close friends came under it as well.

But it was also at this time that, inexplicably, a strange transformation came over Rasool – something that turned him the exact opposite of who and what he used to be. The conscientious family head and the mystic-at-heart seemed to change to a cruel and heartless man. There were two bedrooms in the house. He asked his ailing wife and daughter to sleep in one bed, taking the other bedroom all for himself. He also ordered that his meals be served separately in his room. In fact, he shunned his family very completely. The neighbors watched this in quiet helplessness and disapproval. It was clear that Rasool wanted to put some physical distance between himself and his cancer-stricken wife. Perhaps he thought that cancer was contagious or infectious, the neighbors thought. He was sacrificing his little girl in order to save himself, they thought.

One day during Zuleikha's illness, Rasool came to Sylhet to meet with his two childhood friends. He was covered head-to-foot in the garb of a holy man, an attire he oddly adopted at the same time the said transformation came over him. The three friends talked in private in the Moulavi's residence and this was when it was decided that Zuleikha would be buried in the shade of the Darga, in Zainul's backyard. Also, Rasool asked that if Ayesha should become alone in the world, Zainul would adopt her as his own kin. Zainul gave his solemn promise in front of the Moulavi. Rasool returned to Srimangal with these assurances.

After Zuleikha passed away Rasool took Ayesha and went into complete seclusion. There was an abandoned cottage in an abandoned corner of a tea plantation outside of Srimangal. The manager of the tea plantation was a devotee of the Moulavi. So it was arranged that Rasool and his daughter would live there in that cottage. Visitors were discouraged from coming there and thus no one much knew how the life in this seclusion was, especially for young Ayesha.

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Zainul continued: “Son, only yesterday I got this postcard. Please read this.”

Fazlul read:

My dear Zainul-bhai:

Time has come for me to call in the second favor you so generously granted this wretched rot of a person. I beg you now to take my dear dear Ayesha, the fruit of my loins and the apple of my eyes and the heart of my hearts, under your great wings. I know that once she is there, no harm will come to my fragile little flower.

My call has come. I have heard that a holy man named Dunya Mir the Pir has set up a cottage in the wilderness of the Jaintia Hills, just outside Jowai. I will go and become his mureed, his disciple. There I will await the end of my days. I am leaving in three days.

And so I bid you the fondest of farewells, my dear lifelong friend, the brother I never had.

Khoda Hafez,

Rasool

Fazlul finished reading and looked up. Zainul resumed: “As you can see from the date of the letter, it took longer than usual to come and that has me worried. May be Ayesha is already alone in that remote cottage. So I have arranged for a car to

immediately go to Srimangal and bring her back with me. Ayesha will become a member of this family.

"Son, she is twenty-one years old and you are twenty-five. I think you would make an excellent couple. So I am now requesting a favor of you – that you take her as your wife. We will of course have to put this to her and await her consent."

A stunned Fazlul sat in silence. Never in his entire life had so many conflicting thoughts crossed his mind in such a short time. His commitment to Suraiya – though never explicitly given – was inviolate. At the same time the man who was asking a favor of him now was a man who had granted *his* friend two great favors. How could Fazlul refuse such a giving man a favor? And what was asked of him was most reasonable. He was not being asked to make any sacrifices or accommodations. What would be the consequence of making a wrong choice now? In the end the entire conflict was summarized in his mind in two words: "Khodaye bokbo."

He at last managed these words: "Abbajan, you know that I respect your wishes more than anything else in this world. But I beg you to give me a little time to work things out in my mind. Then I will give you my answer."

The father was a little surprised. He did not know that Fazlul's relationship with Suraiya was anything more than that between the closest of friends. So he had no inkling that Fazlul might have been spoken for. He could not understand why such a reasonable proposal as he had just made needed deliberation. Since Fazlul had never met Ayesha, this deliberation probably had not to do with her. So he said: "Of course, my son. You should not feel pressured to do anything on my account. I was only offering a suggestion. You have no obligation to accept. But please understand that a man's word to his friend is inviolate. And Ayesha should not be left alone one day longer. So I am going to fetch her. She will be a part of this family – if not as your wife, then as your sister. My thought was that from the society's point of view the former arrangement would be wiser."

The father stopped for a moment and then continued: "Now that I think about it, there is another option. Ayesha can live in this house and you can set up a separate household nearby – I will help you do that if you wish to go this way. This will satisfy the society. So the choice is entirely and truly yours."

In the evening the father returned with Ayesha. When Fazlul saw her, he was stunned one more time. He lost his head completely. He went to his father in a hurry

and gave his consent lest the “opportunity” should slip away. But then he had another person to go to. She listened. This time she did not say: “Khodaye bokbo.” She just listened silently and then said with what seemed to be a genuinely happy smile: “I wish you everything that is good in the world, Fazlul Rahman.”



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Ayesha gave her consent and the wedding took place only days after that. About a year later Zainul caught pneumonia and succumbed to it. He had lived to the age of sixty-five, a good life-span. In his deathbed he told Fazlul to lay him to rest in the gravesite next to his wife. So this is what was done. In time Fazlul and Ayesha recovered from the intense grief of his absence. Now the gravesite, where the three of their dearest people rested, became their greatest source of solace. They spent many evenings sitting there in silence, holding hands.

After two years of marriage that were unmixed bliss Ayesha also succumbed to cancer, leaving Fazlul alone, sad and without any interest in living on. Next door lived Suraiya, still unmarried by her choice. But there was no more contact between the two except the nodding of head when they met perchance on the street.

The Moulavi officiated over Ayesha's burial ceremony, as he did indeed for the others resting here. Ayesha rested next to her mother, with a space for a future tomb between them. It came about as a fervent request Ayesha made to Fazlul from her deathbed: "Fazlul, please grant me one request in case my father ever returns and makes himself known to you. When he dies, please let him rest between my mother and me. He is a much-misunderstood man who has suffered greatly. This way he might find some peace in death." Fazlul gave his solemn word.

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Jiyon and Fazlul got into the Jeep for a short drive to a wooded area near the river. They started to walk along the river. There was much activity in the port in the distance but around here everything was calm. A river breeze and shade trees also kept the place cool.

Fazlul spoke: "Before I give the whole story let me first ask what I wanted to ask of you, my friend. I now have a date certain for my death. It will be in a month, early on a very auspicious day of Rabiul Awwal. Although I am a wretched betrayer of trust, I long to have someone hold my hand as I go over. Of all the living people in my life, you are the second closest to me. The one who is the *closest* I have wronged most terribly and I cannot ask her to do this. And I would also like for you to say some things to her for me after I am gone."

Jiyon did not think he should speak at this profound moment, but Fazlul looked at him expectantly. So Jiyon simply said: "Go on."

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Only two days ago in the early evening Fazlul sat in the darkened veranda, looking towards Ayesha's grave – as he did most every evening. Out over the graveyard a partial moon shone. He usually came here when it started to get dark and stayed here until it was as dark as it would get. He sat there neither reminiscing nor meditating, but with a strangely vacant mind.

On this evening, sometime after the darkness was complete, he was startled by the sound of footfall on the dry leaves in the graveyard. A few pigeons noisily flew away. Fazlul at first saw a tall dark mass near the breach in the wall. Gradually he realized that he was looking at an otherworldly-looking figure of a man framed by the emptiness of the breach. The man was clad head-to-foot in black, with a profusion of hair and beard obscuring his face. He looked like Jishu Kristo, Fazlul thought. The

man had on a tall cap of the kind holy men wore. As Fazlul saw him, he also heard the sound of the Muezzin's evening call ascending in the distance.

This man – or the apparition, which to Fazlul was a more apt description – clearly was unaware of Fazlul's presence. With slow movement he walked down the row of graves. At each grave he paused, swept off the dry leaves with his hand and seemed to try to see if the name of the interred was written. He looked up at the Burial Wall behind each grave. He touched each grave for a few moments with his right hand and then placed the same hand flat against his chest. As he finished, Fazlul walked down the steps from the veranda and faced the man: "Holy Man, welcome to my humble home."

The man got a start, but quickly recovered. He pointed to the empty grave – the third position from left, designated for Fazlul – and said: "This place will fulfill its destiny on the fifth day of Rabiul Awaal, a most auspicious day – a good day to die. It will happen when the moon is high."

"*This* grave?!" asked a confused Fazlul.

"Yes," said the man emphatically, adding: "Why, are you unwilling, my son?"

"No, it is not that. But … will someone come?"

"Yes."

"Death?"

"Death will come. Bless you, my son." The man turned and without another word, walked back into the darkness. He seemed to have come from the Darga through the breach and to recede the same way. His receding silhouette looked like Death himself, Fazlul thought. He felt a chill in his very bones.

Fazlul heard the Muezzin's call die away. Suddenly he felt a sense of utter and complete calm. Before the thought of death could frighten him, a sense of death as the great healer came over him. And that sense continued to grow until he surrendered to it completely. He had a date certain and a time certain. All he needed to do now was to settle his affairs and offer himself up to fate. He also felt very strongly the need for the warmth and the closeness of a human being as he would step over. He thought of someone. But that was not possible. Then he thought of friend Jiyon. He bent down and kissed Ayesha's tomb and decided to prepare himself to meet her. He was now completely reconciled.

All day next day Fazlul remained restless from a strange excitement – both in body and in mind. He was overcome by a sense that everything around him was disconcerted. That night he could not sleep at all. Early the following morning, after the first prayer call, he made his way to the Darga and to the residence of the Moulavi whom he had the privilege of addressing Humayun-chacha, Uncle Humayun. The Moulavi was sitting on the front porch on a straw mat, reading. Fazlul did obeisance to the cleric who greeted him with great warmth. Then Fazlul began: "Humayun-chacha, I am not sure why I have come, but this is not a social visit. Something impelled me to come."

"In that case, my son, let me tell you about what I have been reading just now. This is a book about the great Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi. At his tomb there is a calligraphic inscription that says: *This place is the Qa'ba of lovers; he who comes here lacking is made complete.* May be this is the advice Providence wishes to give you. May be it is written that your life shall be made whole again."



"This is very beautiful what you say, Humayun-chacha. But it is the advice of hope. Mine is no longer a journey of hope. I only see darkness, as far as I can see."

The Moulavi ran his hand over his long, silky-white beard and then set aside the book. He then picked up the Qur'an which lay on a low table, open and overturned at a certain page – as though someone had been reading it. He said: "Let us see what there is here to dispel darkness. Ah, here we are, right at the page where the Holy Book was left open! It is Brightness! I will read you a portion from Brightness:

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
By the noon-day BRIGHTNESS,
And by the night when it darkeneth!

Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, neither hath he been displeased.
And surely the Future shall be better for thee than the Past,
And in the end shall thy Lord be bounteous to thee and thou be satisfied."

Fazlul was overcome by the deep, sonorous voice in which the Moulavi recited the verse in Arabic and decided to leave now, carrying that refrain in his ear and in his consciousness. He thanked the Moulavi profusely and took his leave. But as he was leaving, he had another thought. He wondered if his going to meet Ayesha was in fact the good that was coming. He turned and asked: "If things were to look up, can anything be said about the time when this might happen?"

"That is in the hands of Allah the Most Merciful. We cannot make any such predictions. But if it helps you in your present state to hold a timeframe in mind, why not say Rabiul Thani – a time that seems very auspicious."

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"So you see Jiyon, this is most strange. I have a date certain for my death early in Rabiul Awaal. How can the Lord be bounteous to me in Rabiul Thani, the following month? You think the Moulavi is talking of the afterlife? About my being reunited with my Ayesha?"

Jiyon had said very little during the entire narrative, asking only occasional questions for clarification. But now he was being asked a direct question to which he had no answer. He decided to be forthright: "This is all too much for me to absorb immediately – too great a sadness and too deep a mystery. Surely there is some other explanation of that night visit of the apparition – other than the one you have given?"

"No, Jiyon, please do not try to console me and say all shall be well. My end is destined and I am reconciled to that. Let us not analyze our way out of this. There are two things I ask of you, my dear friend: Be by my side when the end comes. And take a most private message from me to our common friend after I am gone. Now, let us return to Bhabiji and the meal she has prepared with her loving hands."

They started back towards the Jeep. Fazlul spoke again: "Jiyon, please understand something. I have accepted this and do not wish to be helped out of this. The fateful hour is the midnight of a Sunday. So please come on the Saturday and stay by me. But when I go out to the place in the evening, you must not come with me. You must

not even observe me. Let whatever happens be between myself and whomever comes to take me away. You promise?"

Jiyon nodded. As they were driving back Jiyon was thinking the momentous situation over in his mind. The more he thought, the more he was sure that he needed help here. He turned to Fazlul and said: "Of course I will do whatever you wish of me. But there is one thing I would like you to allow me. I have a most trusted friend whom I have found a source of wise counsel in most difficult times. Would you accept it if he came with me to Sylhet?"

"Any trusted friend of yours deserves my full trust. He would be most welcome. But not a single soul besides the three of us should know what I have just told you."

Jiyon was most relieved to hear this and immediately started thinking about how to put this matter to Longjam. As he did so, he realized that Longjam would invariably ask for certain specific facts and he, Jiyon, should gather all the facts from Fazlul he could. He now started asking Fazlul specific questions about various aspects of the story he just heard and Fazlul replied unhesitatingly and elaborately.

When they returned home, Fazlul became his composed self and gracefully accepted the hospitality of the Jana home. He insisted on leaving early the next morning. Jiyon drove him to the railway station and said goodbye, promising to come to Sylhet on the appointed Saturday. He saw the train pull away from the station then drove to the home of his employee and friend, Longjam Shantikumar, the tall, athletic Manipuri with a ruggedly handsome Mongoloid face. This was early enough in the morning that Longjam would not yet have left for one of Jiyon's job sites.

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Indeed, Longjam – a bachelor who lived alone with a servant-cum-cook – was sitting on a reclining chair on the porch of his cottage-style home, reading a newspaper in the soft sun. He jumped up when he saw Jiyon's Jeep pull up: "Boss Babu, what an honor to have you visit my humble home!" He immediately called his servant and asked him to make a large pot of tea, and bring piping hot shingaras and jilipis from the neighborhood sweetmeat shop. Jiyon made himself comfortable on the other chair there. After chitchatting a little on the progress of various jobs, Jiyon said: "Actually, Longjam, I am not here on business. There is something that is troubling me greatly and I wanted to consult you."

"I am all ears, Boss Babu."

“All right, then. I heard a narrative yesterday from a childhood friend and this is the soonest I could come to you after that. I will repeat the account as nearly verbatim as I can.”

Jiyon started from his growing up days in Sylhet and gave sketches of the various characters in the three houses there. As he was finishing this ‘backstory’, tea arrived. This was a natural break point and they relished the tea and the scrumptious shingaras and the juicy, crisp jilipis. Next, Jiyon started on the account given him by Fazlul. The tea cups were refilled twice during this narration.

Jiyon finished: “So that is all the information I can give. I will try to answer any questions you have, now or later.”

“That is a pretty comprehensive account. I need to think a little. But before I do that, tell me one thing. You have given your friend your word that you would not intervene in any way. So are you here to just to talk about the situation?”

“Well, yes and no. Actually, what I would like to figure out is whether the night apparition was a benevolent spiritual portent or a malevolent human agency. If it is the latter, then I would not hesitate to break my promise and intervene.”

Longjam fell silent. That meant he was thinking. Jiyon served himself another shingara and some chili sauce and savored the combination very slowly. The idea was not to make Longjam feel rushed.

At length Longjam spoke: “Boss Babu, let us talk about this in the evening when I come around after the day’s work.”

“Sure, Longjam.”

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It was a temperate evening. Jiyon sat in the porch in front of his office with Longjam and Basrat Ali, the Manager of Jiyon’s construction business. After discussing the day’s business, Basrat took his leave. Jiyon turned to Longjam who began: “Boss Babu, are you able to describe the graveyard in the backyard of Fazlulji’s house – I mean the sequence, the spacing, the positioning etc of the various tombs?”

“Fortunately, Longjam, I anticipated this question and quizzed Fazlul thoroughly about this. Of course, I have seen the graveyard at its early stage, with only Fazlul’s mother and Ayesha’s mother interred. Fazlul filled me in on the development since.”

“Very good, Boss Babu. But I am not ready to hear this description yet. Please hold this clear in your mind and I will ask you at a later time.”

Longjam paused for a moment and continued: “Now, did you not tell me that you needed to go to Shillong on some business one of these days?”

“Yes. I have a friend there who owns a fleet of long-haul lorries. I am interested in looking into this business myself and my friend has asked me to come visit him anytime. He would give me a detailed picture of the business. In fact, I was thinking of asking you to come along – seeing as how lorries are your expertise.”

“Good. I will be pleased to come. Now, the way I see it, there are two points we need to concentrate on with regard to the problem at hand: The geometry of the graveyard and Dunya Mir the Pir. The reason for this would be clear in time. So here is the plan I suggest.”

On the Thursday before the fateful Sunday, Jiyon and Longjam would make a road trip to Sylhet. They would spend the night at Fazlul’s. Early next morning they would drive over the Jaintia Hills on to Shillong. On their way they would stop at the few road stops on the highway in and around Jowai and inquire about the Pir. There were very few habitations up on the hills and most of them corresponded to some type of a shop on the main highway. So the chances were good that if the Pir had lived there for a couple of years, someone would know. A lone holy man would surely have attracted attention. And if nobody knew, Jiyon and Longjam would, on their way up, ask the shopkeepers to make inquiries in the villages – and they would stop on their return trip to Sylhet to learn the result of the inquiries.

On hearing this detailed plan Jiyon’s heart leapt. Suddenly, what was a matter of great depression became a matter of great curiosity. The old adrenaline of adventure started to flow again. An overjoyed Jiyon said: “That is a most well-thought out plan! Tell you what, on our way to Sylhet on Thursday we will stop at that riverside dive in Narayanganj for some of their famous goat meat biriyani.”

“And perhaps some of their fried Bhetki fish with mustard sauce?”

“That goes without saying.”

Longjam got up to leave but then paused, as if he had remembered something. He said: “Boss Babu, I know that you know a doctor at the Civil Hospital. Can you approach him to ask some questions, under some type of a cover story?”

Indeed, one of Jiyon's neighbors was a doctor at the Hospital which was a fairly advanced facility. Jiyon replied: "No problem. What are the questions?"

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They arrived at the riverside dive in Narayanganj slightly before lunchtime. The place was still unhurried. As they got off the Jeep, Jiyon noticed that Longjam took the deck of playing cards that was always kept in the glove compartment. All of Jiyon's workers at the jobsites knew about this and borrowed it whenever they wanted to play a game of cards.

They took a table out in the open, overlooking the river and placed their order. Now Longjam took out all the face cards and said: "Using these, please describe to me the graveyard."

A very effective technique, thought Jiyon to himself. He took the cards and spread them on the table and started placing them in some order. Now he spoke: "The last time I was there, there were two tombs: those of Fazlul's mother and Ayesha's mother. Now of course Ayesha is there and Fazlul's father as well. Additionally, there are two more spaces for two future tombs – one for Fazlul and one for Rasool. So imagine this joint in the wood surface of the table is the Burial Wall. I will place these cards to indicate the graves and the would-be graves. The orientation of the graves is slightly slanted with respect to the wall because the heads point to Makkah.

"Starting from the left. The King and the Queen of Spades are Fazlul's parents. Then an empty space for Fazlul. Then the Queen of Hearts is Ayesha; and then an empty space for Rasool; and the Queen of Diamonds is Zuleikha.

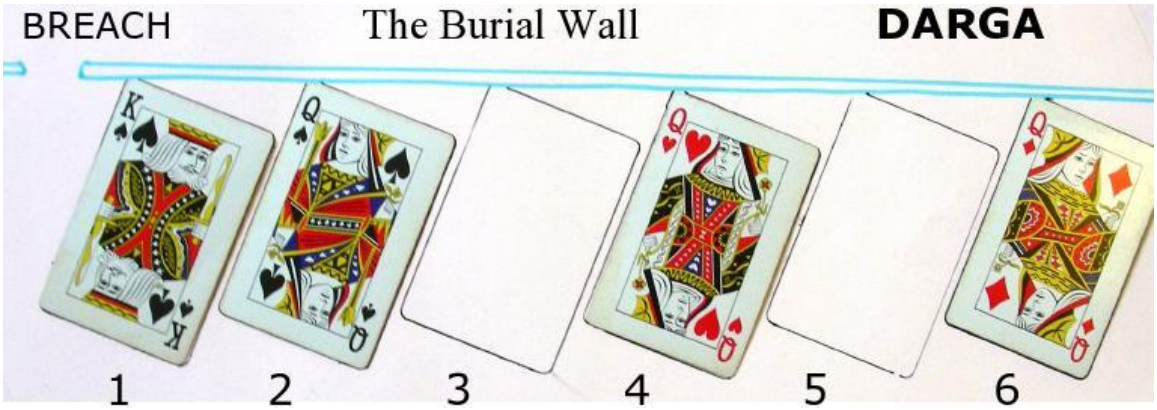
"So now for the history. The sequence of graves was started upon the death of Fazlul's mother. It must have been at that time that the idea of a family graveyard occurred to Zainul. He planned each grave to be first a low brick enclosure – rectangular in shape and about eight bricks high. On each death, the body would be interred in this enclosure which would then be filled level with concrete. There would be no markings or identification.



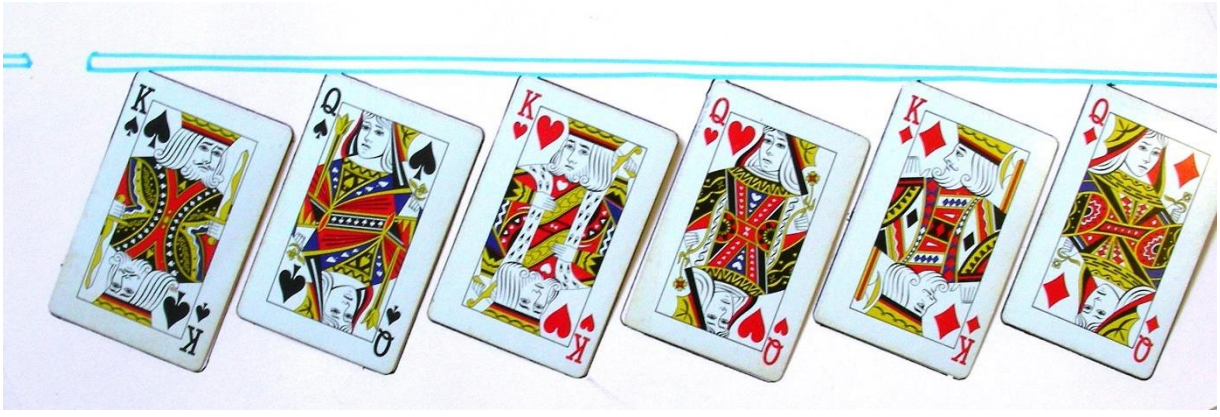
On the wall at the head of each grave there would be placed an oblong plaque – made of fired clay – bearing the calligraphic inscription of a prayer. These plaques would be identical and made by a local family of artisans. Zainul planned six such sites. Let us number them, counting the leftmost grave as Number One. Fazlul's mother was placed in Number Two.

"When Rasool's wife died, Zainul placed her in Number Six. He had some kind of a plan in mind that he did not tell anyone. When he himself was in deathbed, he asked Fazlul to place his body in Number One. And when Ayesha was in her deathbed, she made a most poignant request of Fazlul. She asked that if her father, Rasool, were ever to return, then, on his death, he was to be laid to rest between Ayesha and her mother. Fazlul made a quick calculation in his mind and saw that this would be entirely consistent with what his father's plan was now emerging to be. So he wholeheartedly gave Ayesha his word. It did not escape his attention that in the end, he and Ayesha would rest side by side.

"So here is the graveyard as it is today, with two empty spaces:



"In the very end, this is how the gravesite would look like," finished Jiyon as he placed two cards in the two empty slots.



Longjam now took away these two empty slot cards and turned over the other face cards, to create this arrangement:



He said: “Now, Boss Babu, none of these graves is marked. Suppose you knew the entire history of the graveyard and who all are interred there, but not which grave belongs to whom. Or if you knew, you did not remember anymore. So please clear your mind of everything you know about the identity of the graves. I now ask you: Of the two empty spaces, which one would you figure is set aside for Fazlul and which one for Rasool, and for what reason do you figure what you figure?”

This question gave Jiyon pause. He quickly realized that the answer would require consideration of a number of scenarios. He smiled and said: “Longjam, you have turned this into a psychological riddle. But, fair enough. Let me think about this ….”

At this moment the appetizer course arrived: Fillets of fresh-caught Bhetki fish deep-fried in batter, with that aged, delicious mustard sauce called Kashundi. Some chopped onions and green chilies were placed on the side. With such fare in front, the riddle was forgotten for the time being.

After the wonderful meal the two set out again, chewing on fragrant, sweet betelnut-and-paan wrappings. As Narayanganj receded in the rearview mirror Longjam said: “It all seems a little morose – about the Burial Wall, I mean.”

“In a way, yes. The graveyard is almost like a House of the Dead, right next to the well-lit, cheery House of the Living. The ancient Greeks and others had the custom of burying their dead in a City of the Dead, called the Necropolis. It was set up some distance from the habitation. The two cities coexisted and on death one simply moved from one to the other. So in that view this is perfectly natural.”

After a pause Jiyon added: “Of course us Hindus – and even in your Manipuri religion – we cremate our dead. So the Necropolis is an alien concept for us.”

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The two arrived in Sylhet in the late afternoon Thursday. They found that Fazlul's cook had an elaborate tea service awaiting them, all ready except for pouring hot water into the teapot. Jamshed and his wife from next door had come over – but not Suraiya. Longjam was introduced to everyone and was warmly received. The cover story told everyone was that Jiyon and Longjam were visiting on their way to Shillong on a business trip. They would stop again on the return leg. After about an hour of happy reminiscing Jiyon got up and said he would go visit Suraiya next door. Jamshed and his wife then got up to accompany him home. Jiyon told Fazlul that he would visit Humayun-kaka not today, but on his return trip. Longjam asked Fazlul's permission to walk around the grounds and venture into the Darga. Fazlul showed him the shortcut to the Darga through the breach in the wall.

Suraiya took Jiyon in a warm embrace. She was her most pleasant and affable self, always speaking with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. The two talked nonstop for over an hour. The situation between her and Fazlul never came up once, but it surely had to be there somewhere in the background, underneath all the levity and happy talk.

Longjam spent a long time looking at the graves and the grounds. Indeed the site was just what he had pictured from Jiyon's elaborate description. But that description did not capture the eeriness he now felt. Here, now, in this failing light with shadows from the dense canopy deepening on the graves, he felt a cold shiver move up his spine. Longjam Shantikumar – ex-sergeant of the Bengal Command – felt somewhat disconcerted.

He now moved to examine the graves in detail. Above each grave, on the Burial Wall, was a rectangular patch that was clearly the vestige of some kind of a plaque that was once there. The plaque had crumbled away – for the most part – and only the patch of mortar remained. To this, here and there, remnant pieces of the original plaque stuck. The only place where there remained some calligraphy was Number Three. One could tell from this that the full plaque was quite beautiful. The graves themselves were indistinguishable from one another.

Longjam next examined the breach in the Burial Wall. He then made his way to the Darga and took in the lay of the land. When he returned, he asked Fazlul where he could buy petrol for the Jeep and Fazlul gave him directions to the nearest petrol pump. By the time Longjam returned with a full tank, Jiyon had also returned.

Evening was falling. All three sat quietly by the graves for an hour. Then it was dinner and on to bed. Longjam borrowed a book of Rumi's poems from Fazlul and retired with it.

It was a little difficult to get up and get mobilized so early in the morning next morning, but once there were on the open highway Jiyon and Longjam felt happy. Longjam was driving. Suddenly he pulled up on the side of the road and said: "Boss Babu, I just realized that I forgot to ask Fazlulji the most important question."

"No problem. Let us turn around."

As they were retracing their path Longjam asked: "Boss Babu, what is your thinking about the riddle of the graveyard?"

"Well, however I reason, I come up with Fazlul being assigned Number Three and Rasool Number Five. The other alternative cannot be sustained by any logic when you consider the people involved and their relationships."

"Exactly. I have been trying to understand how the night apparition could select the Number Three site from any clues on the ground or on the graves themselves, but I come up empty. That riddle I gave you tries to understand the sequencing from the human history of the graveyard. But – as you say – there is only one answer and that does not shed any light on our problem. I think the real clue is *on* the Burial Wall."

Fazlul was standing on the front veranda, and figured his visitors must have left something behind. He was a little surprised to hear Longjam ask him a completely unexpected question: "Fazlulji, what was the prayer written in calligraphy on the Burial Wall?"

"It is the most common Islamic prayer: *La illah illa Allah, Mohammad Rasool allah.* It means: There is no god but Allah and Mohammad is his prophet."

"And can you actually read the calligraphy?"

"Yes."

"What is written on the remnant piece of calligraphy over the third grave, counting from the left?"

"It is actually most of the word Rasool."

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Starting about 20 kilometers before Jowai, they started stopping at every roadside business they saw. They did the same thing in Jowai and past it. But no one had heard of Dunya Mir the Pir or any pir for that matter. One shopkeeper said: “I have heard of the historically famous Titu Mir the Pir. But Dunya Mir? No.”

There was one shop – about a kilometer out of Jowai – that stood alone in the wilderness. It seemed as though it would be an ideal place for someone who wanted to choose seclusion. But the shop was closed and there was not a soul in sight. They saw a narrow foot trail that started near the shop wander away into the hills. They decided to stop here on the way back and wait as long as necessary for the shop to open.

Jiyon and Longjam enjoyed the fine hospitality of the friend in Shillong and the visit was most beneficial, business-wise. They made an early start the next morning. They drove nonstop to the shop in the wilderness. It was about midmorning and the shop now was open. The shopkeeper – a young Moslem with black beard, checkered lungi and white cotton fotuah – was happy to see customers and greeted them warmly. Jiyon did not lose any time asking him if he had heard of one Dunya Mir the Pir.

The man looked most surprised. He said: “Of course I know Dunya Mir the Pir. But I thought I was the only person that knew him hereabouts. He came here to be a recluse and I helped him remain a recluse. But what surprises me even more is that you should come asking about him only half an hour after he boarded the bus to Sylhet. He left here for good.”

To get the shopkeeper in the right frame of mind to impart detailed information, Jiyon and Longjam ordered tea and an assortment of cakes and biscuits. There was a slate board advertising a special kind of tea made of fresh cow milk instead of water. It was expensive and so to please the shopkeeper, Jiyon and Longjam ordered two cups. The obviously pleased shopkeeper went to the back of the shop where a few cows were chewing the cud. He milked one for two cups’ worth. As he busied himself making the tea, he started most animatedly to speak about the Pir. He was well primed – there was no need of asking further questions.

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It was about two years ago this time that Dunya Mir the Pir got off the Sylhet-Shillong bus at this shop. He was attired head to foot in the long garb of a holy man and introduced himself by that name. He said he was familiar with this area and liked

this particular place for its isolation and tranquility. He asked the shopkeeper if the latter would help him lead the life of a recluse up in the hills. In return he offered a considerable sum of money. The shopkeeper, who was a very devout religious man, pounced upon the chance of serving a holy man. He would not hear of money.

For a few days the Pir slept at the back of the shop. Although he could have slept inside the shop, he chose to sleep outdoors. He appeared to be in ill health and in some pain. But he told the shopkeeper that it was nothing and the latter was not to worry. The shopkeeper took a close friend into confidence and the two of them built a simple hut by a stream up in the hills – about a kilometer from the shop. It was a one room bamboo-and-clay hut and next to it was a pit latrine. The Pir was most pleased with the accommodation. From here on, every two weeks, the shopkeeper brought the Pir the essential provisions. But only the most essential. The Pir wanted to live a minimalist life.

After the hut was finished and the Pir was installed there, he gave the shopkeeper a blessing from the Qur'an. The shopkeeper thought it meant that some good news was in the offing. When he came home that evening he learned that his wife was pregnant with their first child. He felt the Pir had to be a genuine holy man and devoted himself more ardently to the Pir's service. He also took care to see that nobody else knew about the Pir. For the two years that he had taken care of the Pir, his business steadily grew. Unfortunately, however, the Pir's health seemed to steadily decline. He had difficulty walking and talking.

This morning out of the clear blue the Pir appeared with a cloth bag and said that time had come for him to leave. He said many kind words of thanksgiving and affection to the shopkeeper. The latter asked if he could come and visit the Pir wherever he would be. The Pir smiled sadly and said: "It is best to say goodbye now, my son."

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"So I take it that," asked Longjam, "no visitors ever arrived to see the Pir. For example, did anyone come to become the Pir's disciple?"

"No one ever came to visit him."

"Were the provisions you brought him good for two people and did these contain anything other than food?"

“No. Two people could not live on those provisions unless one starved. And they contained a few things besides food. Kerosene and matches for the hurricane lantern which was hardly used. And quantities of Phenyl and Dettol. Soap balls for washing clothes and bathing. Things like that.”

“Did the Pir receive any kind of communication from anyone?”

“He received an occasional envelope by post. It would be addressed to me and held at the Jowai Post Office where I would pick it up. I bicycle to Jowai almost daily. But I could not tell you who or where the letters were from.”

“When did the last such letter arrive?”

“Let me see. I believe it was about a month to two months ago.”

“Upon receiving that letter, did the Pir travel to any place?”

“Well, actually, he did. He went to Sylhet for a few days.”

“I see. And if you could remember, what was the blessing he gave you? Can you tell us anything about that?”

“It was about better days ahead. I believe he said he was reading from Brightness.”

Now the shopkeeper asked a question: “I have told you a great deal about the Pir. Can you tell me what this is all about? I do not wish him to come to any harm.”

Jiyon answered: “We mean him no harm. Actually, it is not the Pir we are interested in. We are looking for a person who said he would come here and become a disciple of Dunya Mir the Pir. But from all that you described, there does not seem to be any indication of another person ever having come here.”

Longjam then asked the shopkeeper if he would give them directions to the hut so they could go visit. He said: “Sometimes the place where a holy man lives becomes holy.” The shopkeeper gladly gave them directions. They asked him to look after the Jeep and set off.

The foot trail was indistinct but not difficult to follow. Soon they arrived at a toyland-sized hut by a stream. The hut had a door that looked out on the stream and the hill slope beyond. One so inclined could view this as a luxury home with a magnificent vista. And the solitude and the silence were palpable. Only the steady murmur of the stream broke the silence, or rather, became a part of the silence.

Longjam pulled on the door and it opened. A strong medicinal smell nearly overwhelmed both men. “Smells like a mixture of Dettol and Phenyl,” said Longjam. The inside of the hut was largely bare, with a bed made out on the floor in one corner. A hurricane lantern hung from the ceiling. Outside the hut and near to it was a pit in the ground, with three bricks around it. Burnt charcoal filled half the pit. This was clearly the kitchen. At some distance away they could see the open-air latrine.

“What a life,” said Jiyon, pensively. They started on their way back. When they arrived back at the shop Longjam asked the shopkeeper: “When you brought provisions for the Pir, did you ever notice anything unusual, out of the ordinary?”

The shopkeeper thought for a moment and replied: “Well, yes. Unusual in a sadly beautiful way. Once as I was approaching the hut, I heard singing of a hymn in a very feeble voice. Then I saw the Pir trying to do a Whirling Darvesh dance. But his feet could not carry him and he kept falling. I hid for a while so as not to intrude. After he had tried this many times he sat down – looking most dejected.”

They thanked the shopkeeper profusely for his story and for the excellent tea, and were on the road again. As they picked up speed Longjam asked: “Boss Babu, what is the Whirling Darvesh dance?”

“It is a mystic Sufi ritual. You wear an overall-like attire whose bottom flares up like a long skirt when you whirl. You raise your left hand and point it to the sky, with you palm open as if you are receiving a gift from God. Your right hand is pointed to the ground, with your palm open as if you are passing that gift on to man. And you whirl and whirl and whirl. You become ecstatic with spiritual joy. You feel closer to heaven, I suppose.”

“Thank you. And about this prayer from Brightness. Have we not just heard about this recently in connection with this very matter?”

“I think you are referring to the Moulavi giving the same blessing to Fazlul. He read from the Qur’an which happened to be open at that place. I see! Is this significant?”

“Not by itself. But combined with other things it may be. The Moulavi did not know where the Qur’an was opened at. So who was reading that book? Boss Babu, what do you think the chances are that in connection with the same ‘case’ – so to speak – we would encounter the exact same verse of the Qur’an twice, by pure coincidence?”

“Normally I would say that the chances are small. But where holy men are involved this may not be true. And that one may be an oft-quoted verse.”

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They arrived in Sylhet late afternoon Saturday. Jiyon decided to do nothing the rest of the day but sit with Fazlul. They talked about childhood, about their days together in Calcutta, about their respective parents. As darkness fell they went out and sat by the graveyard. Longjam went for a walk towards the Darga. After a simple and solemn meal it was time for bed. Here again, as Fazlul lay in his bed, Jiyon sat on the edge of the bed, holding Fazlul’s hand and talking of things past.

Shortly after breakfast on Sunday morning, Jiyon and Longjam started towards the Darga. Fazlul said this would be a good time to visit the cleric who would become very busy later today. The front door of the cleric’s residence – which was almost always kept ajar – was closed today. Jiyon knocked and a servant peered through the half-opened door. He said the cleric was not receiving any visitors. Jiyon said firmly: “I am not a visitor. Please tell Hunayun-kaka, the Moulavi, that Jiyon Jana from Khulna is here to see him.”

The servant left and shortly thereafter the cleric himself appeared, beaming with joy: “Jiyon my dear boy! Providence must have brought you here because I was just thinking about you.”

Jiyon introduced Longjam and they both did obeisance to the cleric. He invited them in to his front room, or the portico as it was called. Jiyon noticed that the door to the inner sanctum – which in his memory was always kept wide open – was today closed. He smelled something and looked at Longjam while flaring the nostrils. Longjam acknowledged with a very slight nod that he had had the same experience. After a few minutes of chitchat Longjam got up and said he wanted to go visit the tomb of Shahjalal and would Jiyon meet him in front of the tomb when he was finished visiting here. After he left the Moulavi shifted in his seat as if to make himself comfortable for what was coming. He said: “Jiyon, all these years I have known you since you were a child, we always talked in the lighter vein. Even when I read the Qur’an to you boys and Suraiya, it was more like reading poetry. But now I have a rather worldly matter to discuss with a grown-up you.”

Jiyon likewise shifted in his seat as if to indicate the he was all attention. The cleric began: “Now Jiyon, when you and Fazlul studied in Calcutta, did you see much of each other?”

“We saw each other almost every evening. I lived in Eden Hindu Hostel and Fazlul lived in the YMCA hostel just around the corner. Then in the postgraduate years we lived in the same hostel. We made it a habit of meeting for afternoon tea. After that sometimes we went for long walks.”

“Good. Given that this was the last stage of his bachelorhood, I want to know if he expressed to you how he felt about Suraiya.”

A little puzzled at this turn of the subject, Jiyon replied: “He talked about her incessantly. Actually, he talked about her almost as though she were his future wife.”

“And did you have any occasion to know how she felt about him?”

“Well, no. But when I talked to her only two days ago when we stopped here on our way to Shillong, she seemed to studiously avoid the subject of Fazlul.”

“That is about what I thought. Now here is my thinking. Ayesha would never want her beloved Fazlul to spend the rest of his life a sad and broken man. If my dear friend Rasool were here today, he would want his son-in-law to be happy. He would not want Ayesha’s beloved to suffer loneliness the rest of his life. And in my friend’s absence, that duty falls on me. You follow?”

“I think so. And I also agree.”

“I thank you, my boy. Now, I am a cleric and not conversant in the affairs of the heart. But it seems to me that these two belong together, but that there has come a chasm between them that neither can bridge. That is why a third person is necessary to close the chasm. And when that thought came to my mind, you – and only you – came to my mind.”

“I understand, Humayun-kaka.”

After some more chitchat about Jiyon’s parents and family, Jiyon took the cleric’s leave. He walked over to Shahjalal’s tomb and found Longjam sitting on a paved platform under a shade tree. Jiyon said: “Longjam, I appreciate your tactfully leaving so the Moulavi could talk to me in private. But here is what that was about.” Jiyon repeated his conversation with the cleric.

“It is only eight o’clock,” said Longjam. “I suggest you go for a drive with Suraiyaji. I can find something to do meanwhile. Actually, I need a quiet place to think and this here seems to be a fine place.”

After a brief pause Longjam added, as if speaking to himself: “Repeated verse, repeated smell … ”

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“Suraiya, I want to take you for a drive in my Jeep. Let us go to Madhabkundo Waterfalls that we loved so much as children. Also, there is something personal I would like to talk to about.”

Suraiya listened and then said with a very sweet and mischievous smile: “You are a married man now, Jiyon Jana! And to a very beautiful woman at that!”

Jiyon smiled back: “No, it is not that kind of a talk.” He paused and then said: “Well, it *is*. In a way.”

They found their old favorite spot: an out-of-view niche that overlooked the Falls. Jiyon by now had a plan how to get into the topic. So he began: “Suraiya, I recently heard about an inscription over the entrance door to Jalaluddin Rumi’s tomb. It goes….”

Suraiya took over: “*This place is the Qa’ba of lovers; he who comes here lacking is made complete*. Obviously you have visited Humayun-chacha recently. He really loves to tell people about that one. But surely you are not expecting me to go to Rumi’s tomb and walk through that door? Is this not in Turkey?”

“No, I don’t want you to go as far as to Turkey. I am expecting you to go only to the house next to yours and walk through the door.”

Suraiya remained silent for a long while. May be she considered this an unwarranted intrusion, thought Jiyon. But he too remained silent. They both kept staring at the Falls, watching the way of the rushing water. At length Suraiya spoke: “No one has invited me in.”

Jiyon was most glad to hear that answer. She was open to discussion. He quickly composed a speech in his mind and delivered it, even if somewhat awkwardly.

“He who would invite you in is dying of guilt. He feels he has wronged you beyond any measure and wounded you mortally. He feels he had made a tacit commitment

to marry you, and he reneged on it. The dual agony of the loss of Ayesha and of having wronged you has left him eager for death. And I am not speaking here metaphorically."

Again a long silence. Then she spoke most sadly: "Jiyon, this is all new to me. For I never felt he had made any commitment, explicit or implicit, to marry me. He was free to marry anyone, and if he had asked me, I would have most eagerly accepted. When he married Ayesha, I felt a great sense of sadness and loss, but also very happy for Fazlul. Ayesha was such a sweet person in every way that you had to fall under her spell. No one could have harbored any feelings of animosity or jealousy towards her. I wished Fazlul could continue our friendship, but I also understood that in our society friendship between a married man and a single woman can be frowned upon. So there is no cause for Fazlul's agony at all – over betraying me, that is."

"So there seems to be a deep chasm between you two that is based entirely on Fazlul's perception. And if I had not talked to you today, this perception would have continued. Now, I will ask you something straight out. If, after a natural period of mourning, Fazlul were to ask you to marry him, would you accept?"

This time Suraiya replied immediately and in a clear voice: "Well, he can ask and hear the answer himself."

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Fazlul and Longjam were sitting in the living room, with Fazlul giving a discourse on the history of the Darga. There was still quite a bit of time left before lunch. Longjam stood up and said he would take a bath. Jiyon invited Fazlul for a walk along the street. "Fazlul, this fateful day is drawing to a close," said Jiyon. "There is something I wanted to tell you. You know that Suraiya and I have always been able to talk very freely. Today the subject of the two of you came up. She told me that she had never felt that you were committed to marry her and she bore you no ill will at all over marrying Ayesha. On the contrary, she was very fond of Ayesha. She was shocked to hear that you feel guilty over not marrying her."

Fazlul looked at first most confused. What had been eating him inside all these days was just a product of his own imagination! Suddenly now, he looked very serene. "Jiyon, you have no idea what this means to me," he said, "especially coming on this day. It is as though the entire sky is showering down blessings on me. I can now embrace death with a cleansed conscience and no fear."

“Fazlul, in that case, I want you to humor me and promise me something. If nothing happens tonight, tomorrow you will start to reconcile wholeheartedly with Suraiya. Obviously you think that this is a hypothetical situation. Nevertheless you must promise and keep the promise.”

“Jiyon, my dear friend, since I will never have to face this situation, consider the promise given. A hundred times given. A thousand times given.”

“Good. And I take it then that the second favor you asked of me – to take a message to Suraiya from you – is all taken care of?”

“All taken care of.”

They walked together a long while in silence – each in his own thought, each thinking of what was coming. When they returned, a freshly bathed and dressed Longjam was seated in the backyard. Jiyon sat down next to him. It was Fazlul’s turn to bathe. This would be a final bathing ritual and not an everyday bath, thought Jiyon. Everything Fazlul did now would be for the final time. He felt heartsick.

Jiyon filled Longjam in on his conversations with Suraiya and with Fazlul. When he finished, Longjam said: “Excellent! You have used your time most profitably, Boss Babu.”

“But all this is to no purpose, right?”

Longjam did not answer. Seemingly he took it as a rhetorical question. Instead he said: “Now, on this whole mystery, I have a rather elaborate theory that rests on a few tenuous points. The theory cannot be proved until after the fact. Until tomorrow morning, that is.

“But please do not despair. I do have an answer to your main question. I am as certain as can be that something will happen tonight and that it will be benevolent, and not malevolent.”

Jiyon’s heart leapt. If Longjam said so it would be so. He felt he was coming back from the land of the dead. He asked, this time truly rhetorically: “So there is no death in the stars?”

“Oh no! There definitely *is* death in the stars.”

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The evening meal was simple and was conducted largely in silence. They hardly ate. At about 10 pm the servant retired to his quarters. Now Fazlul went to his bedroom and sat cross-legged on his bed with his eyes closed. Jiyon and Longjam sat in the living room. Outside, there was moonlight. The quiet of the night tonight somehow seemed a different quiet. Precisely at eleven Fazlul came out, dressed in laundered crisp white. There was a glaze in his eyes and he had an otherworldly look about him. He held a leather-bound, gold-embellished copy of the Qur'an in his hand. Nothing was said. Jiyon and Longjam walked with him to the backyard. Jiyon hugged Fazlul for a long minute. Then Longjam held Fazlul's two hands in his own hands. Fazlul put a small straw mat in the empty grave earmarked for himself, Number Three, and sat. After standing there speechless another minute Jiyon and Longjam came back into the living room. They sat on a sofa that backed onto the wall that was against the backyard. From here they would hear any sounds there.

It had been a long day for everyone and Longjam started to doze off. He must know something that allowed him to relax even under these circumstances, Jiyon thought. He himself was too tense to do anything but sit there, wide awake. He had promised not to intervene or observe, but technically, he still could listen to any sounds. He reclined as far as he could and sat with his ears as close to the wall as possible. But then, perhaps because of this comforting reclining posture, he too dozed off. Shortly thereafter both were fast asleep.

Jiyon heard the wall clock chime. Half asleep, he counted five. With great effort he opened his eyes, but he was confused as to where he was. It took him several seconds to realize that he was away from home, in Sylhet. Then he realized he was in Fazlul's living room. And then the entire circumstances became clear to him. For a moment, he wished to God it was a nightmare. But it was real. Dawn was breaking outside. As Jiyon stirred in the sofa, Longjam woke up. The two looked at each other and with one sudden movement, both sprang to their feet and made it to the backyard. The early morning chill and the thin mist there gave them a shiver.

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There were two men: Fazlul in crisp white; and the other one, a tall man in all black with profuse white hair and beard. One man lay within the low brick wall of the future tomb, Number Five. The Holy Qur'an was placed over his chest. The other sat cross-legged next to him, inside the grave, in a meditative posture. He had his eyes closed. Jiyon looked at Longjam: "Dunya Mir the Pir?"

Longjam took a few steps closer and inhaled to smell the air. Then he nodded. Jiyon placed his two hands on the shoulders of the seated man and asked: “Is he dead?”

“Yes, he is in eternal rest,” replied Fazlul as if from within a very deep slumber. He stood up and as he steadied himself, said: “I have come back from the land of the dead. I have seen something that has left me wanting so much to be a part of this mortal world – its every sound, every touch, every taste. Let us go inside. We will all stand round in the kitchen and talk and make ourselves a steaming cup of tea. I will tell you all. Then we will plan how to administer the last rites to this holy man who has chosen to honor my home by resting here.”

Fazlul’s hands were shaky and so Longjam made the strong tea, with half milk and half water and a great deal of sugar. He served large portions in tall glasses instead of the tiny tea cups. Fazlul held the glass with his two palms wrapped around it as if soaking in every bit of this earthy warmth. But he was still shaking. They sat down in the living room again. Then Fazlul – after he was somewhat composed – proceeded with his narrative.

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After Jiyon and Longjam left him, Fazlul sat with his hands clasped round the Qur’an on his lap. He started to go over his entire life in his mind, starting from his earliest memories. He decided to do this slowly, savoring each event in all its richness and texture – as well as he could remember. He realized anew that until he met Ayesha, his entire life was full of Suraiya. And when he came to point when he first met his beloved Ayesha, he found that the faces of the two women were merging and interchanging. As he puzzled over this, he heard footsteps on the dry leaves. He turned and saw that the night apparition from the previous time had come.

“Peace be upon you, my son,” the apparition said. Fazlul got up and did obeisance. Then he asked: “Is this time?”

“Yes, my son. It is time to rest with the near and dear ones.”

“How will the end come?”

The apparition took out from inside his clothes a small vial containing some type of potion. “This is the most effective and painless way across. It simply puts you to sleep and you never wake up again.”

Fazlul cupped his hands to receive the vial. The apparition placed it his hands, saying: “That is most kind of you, my son, to offer to pour the potion in my mouth and help me across.”

Fazlul was first shocked to hear this, and then confused. What did the apparition mean? He asked: “I do not understand. How would I die by pouring the potion into your mouth?”

This time the apparition remained silent for a while and then responded: “I see what has happened. You thought I was speaking of *your* death. Oh no no, my son. You have a long and full life ahead. You should spend it with a warm and caring human being. That is what your dead wife would want. It is I who seek a bit of your land to be buried in. My call has come.”

In an instant everything became clear to Fazlul. His last conversation with the apparition had been ambiguous and he had reached the wrong conclusion – given especially his desire to depart this life. Having thus cleared things up his mind, Fazlul asked: “Why do you wish to die?”

“Believe me, my son, that is the best course. It was not a decision lightly made. And I am an old man anyway. So please help me across.”

The men stepped into the rectangular area and lay down full length. He closed his eyes and prayed silently. Then he opened his eyes and said: “I am ready. Blessings of Allah the Merciful be upon you and your house. And remember what I said. There is nothing in this life that is more precious than the warmth of another human being.”

As Jiyon was about to ask how the man came to be in Number Five instead of Number Three which he had originally pointed to, he saw Longjam signal with his head not to. Jiyon understood. Longjam was saying: Let this be. Instead, Longjam asked Fazlul: “Where is the vial now? I don’t see it anywhere.”

“I don’t know …,” replied Fazlul.

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“I will go and bring Humayun-kaka. You two go and tell Jamshed and Suraiya. They can then tell the neighbors. We need help and also we need to have a funerary gathering,” said Jiyon to Fazlul and Longjam, and left.

Jiyon found the Moulavi seated in the front room of his quarters, dressed for going out, the Qur’an and another leather-bound book ready in hand. He would now have

to change his plans. Jiyon told him only that an unknown holy man had turned up last night and died in his Fazlul's backyard. Would the Moulavi come and preside over whatever rites needed to be performed?

Without any words, a solemn Moulavi got up and accompanied him with the two books in hand. Soon neighbors arrived in great numbers. When they heard the news, everyone wanted to witness the passage of an unknown holy man from this life. This was seen as a most auspicious event to be present at.

As the group gathered round the graveyard and the Moulavi stood near the head of the dead, two men came forward. One of them said: "Moulavi, we would like the honor of performing the washing ceremony."

This meant that the dead would be undressed and his bare body would be ceremonially washed all over. The Moulavi replied: "Well, seeing as how this is an unknown man, we do not know if he is carrying any diseases. So, for the safety of all, we will perform a symbolic bathing ceremony. Please sprinkle water all over him while I say the prayers."

Now he turned to Fazlul: "It is unnecessary to move the body and dig the earth and put him back in. It seems that we can just fill in the brick-walled enclosure with earth and then concrete, and not disturb his rest."

Everyone stood round in a circle for the prayers. Jiyon and Longjam stood back separately, and respectfully. Seeing this, Suraiya came over to them and looked questioningly. Jiyon said: "We are Hindus and so …"

"You are *friends*," said Suraiya firmly and led the two by hand to the prayer circle. Everyone shifted to make room for them. With the circle thus completed, the Moulavi began his intonations in sonorous Arabic.

With this last phase of the ritual of burial over, the Moulavi now held the other book that he had brought with him. He said: "This man – unknown to you – who has come here to die among you deserves a little more than the prescribed rites. I will read a few lines for him, written by a wise man named Kahlil Gibran:

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then shall you begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance."

Gradually the neighbors left and all the activities subsided. Suraiya lingered on at Fazlul's request. Afterwards Jiyon saw them go out for a walk and felt most satisfied.

Jiyon asked Longjam: "So, as we suspected, Dunya Mir the Pir was at the Moulavi's house yesterday?"

"Yes. But there is no Dunya Mir the Pir. This is Fazlulji's father-in-law Rasool . He came to be buried next to his wife and daughter."

Jiyon decided to ask Longjam for the explanation later. For now, he asked: "Should we not tell Fazlul and the Moulavi who the dead man really is?"

"Boss Babu, the Moulavi knows who the dead man is. And he chose not to disclose this to us. Fazlulji chose not to tell us how the man came to be in Number Five instead of Number Three. Obviously some discussion took place between the two that led to the man being assigned Number Five. So Fazlulji came to know who the apparition was. But both the Moulavi and Fazlulji chose to keep their own secrets. So I think we best let their secrets be. "

"There is another curious thing," continued Longjam, "The Moulavi did not make anything of the man having committed suicide. I would have thought this would be an issue while administering the last rites."

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Even though it was very early on Monday morning, many people from the burial ceremony turned up to say goodbye to Jiyon and Longjam. As Longjam was doing an inspection of the Jeep, Fazlul took Jiyon aside and said: "I have kept my promise to you."

They said a final round of goodbyes and were off. Jiyon was driving this time. Once on the open highway he said: "All right, Longjam, I am all ears."

"Boss Babu, at the heart of this matter are two mistaken assumptions. One we have heard from Fazlulji. He misunderstood the ambiguous message of the night visitor and prepared for his own death. And that resulted in his involving us in this whole matter. The other is what I deduced and now know to be correct. It proved to be correct when, yesterday, the Moulavi would not let anyone touch the dead body. You see, my theory was that Rasool Qureshi had leprosy. And he had mistakenly assumed that it was contagious. All the other events followed from that assumption. As you found out from your neighbor the doctor of the Civil Hospital of Khulna, leprosy is

not contagious. The doctor also told you that the disease can take many years to kill the victim. This is what happened to Rasool."

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Rasool Qureshi had started to notice some symptoms in his body which he quickly recognized to be due to leprosy. He realized further that this was a most dreaded disease and his entire family would be shunned by the society. So he elected not to go to a doctor. As he was deliberating what to do, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. A doubly devastated Rasool felt he had now to act. He could not let his wife contract leprosy on top of cancer. And, for his family's sake, he could not let the outside world know that there was leprosy in the family. His sweet, darling daughter Ayesha would never be married then. So he developed his persona of a cruel and heartless person. For their own sake he did not reveal the truth to his wife and his daughter. He let them misjudge him, if indeed they did.

But he did tell two people: His two childhood friends. He must have sworn them to secrecy, for neither Zainul nor the Moulavi told anyone about this. Zainul must have sought out medical information and found that leprosy was neither contagious nor hereditary. Otherwise he would have told his son about this before asking him to marry Ayesha. Ironically, it seems that the other disease, cancer, *was* hereditary, in this case.

Rasool's disease progressed and there came a time when Rasool realized that it would no longer be possible for him to live under the same roof with Ayesha and at the same time maintain his secret. So he created this persona of Dunya Mir the Pir and stepped right into the role. He knew the Jowai area and that is how he selected that spot. He received occasional news of Ayesha from the Moulavi by letter. When Ayesha died Rasool made a decision to end his own suffering: end his life, that is. But he wanted to be united in death with his beloved wife and daughter. So he sought the Moulavi's help. The Moulavi must have agreed to the ending of life in this way because Rasool was dying a very painful death. His end was near. He was practically a rotting corpse. He used Dettol to cleanse himself and Phenyl to clean whatever he touched. Both these have strong and lasting smells. Nevertheless, the Moulavi must have had great difficulty accepting suicide.

The Moulavi and Ayesha spoke extensively before her death. He would have told her about the true dilemma of her father. He would also have known from her about Rasool's planned grave site in the family graveyard. But he probably did not know

or did not communicate to Rasool the exact site. When Rasool came to visit the graveyard that night, he saw an empty grave with his name written on a plaque on the wall above it. Remember that he was well-versed in the Arabic and other related scripts. He figured that Ayesha must have earmarked this site for him. So he pointed to it and asked Fazlul's permission to occupy it. But since to Fazlul it was his own future grave, the misunderstanding ensued.

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When Longjam was finished Jiyon said: "Very fine work, Longjam! But why could not I figure some of this out? Things seem so clear now that you have explained. I asked the doctor in Khulna questions about leprosy on your request and even so I did not connect the dots!"

"That's because you are too close to the people involved. One needed some distance to see things for what they are."

"I suppose. And what about that matter of Brightness?"

"Well, I do not know anything about what is inside the Qur'an but I surely know that it is big book. So if the same section of the book keeps coming up again and again, it is more likely to be meaningful rather than coincidental. The fact that the Qur'an was open at that section when Fazlul visited the Moulavi after that night visit probably meant that Rasool had just been there and had been reading the book and in particular, that verse. We learned later from the shopkeeper that Brightness was his favorite section."

"So everything is explained except the Moulavi's blessing to Fazlul – that he would receive something bounteous in Rabiul Thani. I suppose he meant Suraiya coming into Fazlul's life."

"Exactly. I figure that it will take a month or so for Fazlulji and Suraiyaji to be comfortable about speaking about their own feelings for each other. That would put us into Rabiul Thani. The Moulavi made a prediction to Fazlul and then he pressed you into service to see that the prediction would come true! Actually, if this were a novel, its true main character would be not Fazlulji, but the Moulavi. This man of god who chose to give up a homesteader's life kept the finest qualities of a homesteader. He mentored his childhood friend all through the latter's life and looked after him and his family in their great distress. A very fine human being, this cleric!."

“That is how we have always seen him. But now I have a new appreciation of the fact. That prayer he read from Gibran for his friend was most touching and most personal, now that I think about it.”

“Who is Gibran, Boss Babu?”

“Kahlil Gibran was an Arab writer of very fine prose and poetry, who lived in America. I believe he died about ten years ago. His writing was in spiritual and mystical vein. I have a book by him called *The Prophet*. You are most welcome to borrow it, if you like.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Suddenly Jiyon was overcome by a great sense of relief and joy. He felt that there was much good in this world to cherish. He simply felt happy to be alive – under this great sky and the warming sun and surrounded by all that was in view. He decided to change to a completely different, happy subject: “What say you Longjam that we pace ourselves to arrive in Naraynganj about lunchtime?”

“My thought exactly.”

“The same place?”

“The same place.”

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A few minutes later Jiyon saw a street side tea shack and pulled up: “Longjam, let’s get some strong tea I feel I am not fully awake yet.”

As they sat sipping tea, Jiyon could not help but revert to the subject: “Well, Longjam, it seems that we have a story that is fully explainable in every respect. No otherworldly mysteries here!”

“Well, there are or one or two interesting points about the manner in which Rasool died. There was no vial. And what did Fazlulji mean by saying ‘I have seen something?’ I wonder…”

Longjam suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope. “Fazlulji slipped this into my pocket just as we were about to leave, and you were busy saying goodbye to the others. I completely forgot about it. He said we should read this when Sylhet was way behind us.”

“Sylhet *is* way behind us. So let’s read it.”

Jiyon opened the envelope, took out the single sheet of paper and read aloud:

Dear Jiyon and Longjamji,

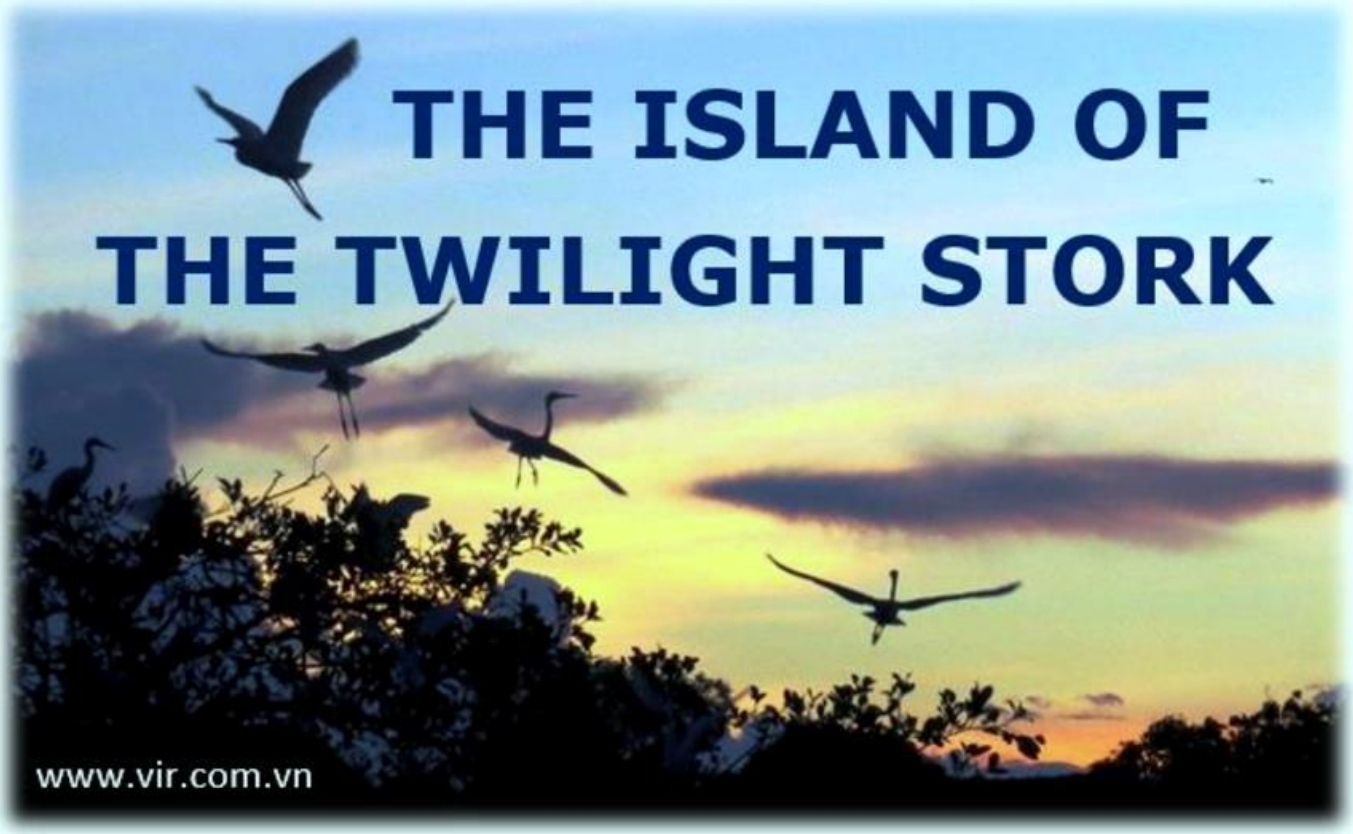
Words are not enough to express my gratitude to you for what you have done for me and what your being by my side has meant to me.

Please forgive me for engaging in a little deception with you. I had to resort to this until we would be outside the presence of all the others who came to the burial. For the truth here is not something that can be told openly. But from the beginning I have taken the two of you in my greatest confidence and so I must let you two in on the final truth.

My father-in-law Rasool Qureshi (I know you two are too clever to not have figured everything out) did not drink poison. Humayun-chacha, for one, would not have condoned suicide. Instead, my father-in-law sat in a meditative posture in his designated grave site and started to will himself to death. I sat opposite him, holding his two rotting hands in my mine, in spite of his strong protestations. Fear of contracting leprosy was the farthest thing from my mind. And strangely, I had a very distinct feeling that I was touching Ayesha.

We sat a long time in this position, while I literally felt that he was slipping away from life. His hands started to go cold and limp. His breathing became shallow and imperceptible. Then, when the moon was high, everything stopped.

Then somebody came for him.



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1
CALCUTTA, WEST BENGAL
A question

 t about 4 o'clock in the afternoon Jiyon Jana stepped out of the examination hall, having submitted the last installment of his test papers for the Master's degree in Applied Physics from Calcutta University. He felt exhausted and numb from the months of strenuous studies for this examination, and from the sudden release of all that stress that now came. Everything was behind him now. The conventional student life was over. He could now continue in the academia and do research, or he would have to start on a career path. He had not decided which. This was odd, he realized. Most people at this juncture would have long decided on their next step.

His thoughts were interrupted when the Department's bearer approached and said that the Head of the Department, Professor Sengupta, wanted to see him. Jiyon knew that the professor wanted him to do a doctorate degree in the Department of Applied Physics, and thought this was probably why he was being summoned. As he stepped in to Professor Sengupta's spacious office, the latter asked him how the examination went. Then he got down to his point. From time to time, the Department received requests from British universities to send their best student to do a doctorate in England. In this case there was a request from Cambridge University and it involved a handsome scholarship and even a travel grant. The slot was Jiyon's for the asking.

Jiyon was mildly surprised – not at the offer which was not very unusual for an exceptional student like him – but because of the way things were being precipitated for him before he himself was ready. He expressed great joy and thankfulness and asked the professor how much time he had to decide. This completely deflated the professor. He said: "Jiyon, anyone would pounce on such a god-sent opportunity and seize it immediately! Why do you need time?! Well, yes, I can understand that you need to talk to your parents."

"Yes, I would like to go to Dhaka and speak to my parents," said Jiyon. "But this is also a big step and I want to be sure that I am the right person to occupy this valuable slot. Surely you have a second candidate in mind, and I want to be fair to him."

“Fair enough. But I can give you a month at most and no more. In fact, if you accept, you would have to be starting on the long sea voyage to England in a few months’ time. Good luck to you.”

Jiyon came back to his postgraduate hostel, the same hostel where his childhood friend Fazlul Rahman from Sylhet also lived. Fazlul was finishing his M. A. degree. Fazlul was in his room, sipping the afternoon tea. Another cup was ordered. Then Jiyon spelled out his dilemma. After listening to him attentively Fazlul said: “But where is the dilemma? A dilemma exists between two things. Here you have, on one hand, the possibility to do a Cambridge Ph. D. What is it that you are weighing this against? What is it that you have on the other hand?”

“I am not sure, Fazlul. Answer me one question first: What do you think the most primary consideration should be for anyone in general in choosing a career path?”

“I don’t know about ‘anyone in general.’ But in your case, your family is wealthy and you have considerable freedom to choose what you want to do. In that case I would say you should choose that work which returns something to you. Worldly satisfaction, intellectual nourishment … such things. And it seems to me that this Cambridge opportunity is just right in this respect.”

“What about nourishment of the spirit, of the soul?”

“Wouldn’t the scientific quest nourish the spirit and the soul? Anyway, let’s go for a walk and continue this discussion.”

Once on a desolate side street, Fazlul picked up the thread: “Surely you have something in mind, even the vaguest notion, as to what the alternative is! Search your mind.”

“Actually, Fazlul, I am thinking of Kaku.”

“Then your course of action seems clear to me. Go visit Jibon-chacha. You have one month. That’s enough time to go to Akyab to see Jibon-chacha and then to Dhaka to see your parents and then return here. You will come back with an answer, I am sure.”

2

COX'S BAZAAR, EAST BENGAL

An enigma

In Chittagong, as Jiyon sat at a window seat in the bus, he saw a Ba'ul with an ektara – the rustic, one-stringed musical instrument – slung over his shoulder get into the bus. He had no luggage. The wandering minstrel was orange-clad and had a generally shabby appearance. His hair and beard were long, unclean and matted. His body rags were that of a destitute person. But all this seemed to contrast with a fine figure the man cut – tall, athletic, well-built and seemingly well-nourished, once.

As the bus left Chittagong and gained the open country road, someone called out: "Rasik Ba'ul, O Rasik Ba'ul, sing us a few songs please!" Immediately others joined in the pleading. Obviously the man was known hereabouts. Upon all this entreaty the tall man got up and stood at the head of the aisle, facing the passengers. He strummed the instrument for a bit and then started to sing. His voice was rich and atmospheric and the song had a devotional quality to it. The singing continued – one song after another. The passengers were spellbound. Many of the songs were rather sad. At length, exhausted, the man sat down – but not before acknowledging the great ovation from his listeners. Although he did not ask for it, the passengers put money in the gourd of his ektara. After putting in the money each person joined his palms as if to say this was a respectful offering to a holy man, and not alms for the poor.

At Cox's Bazaar the driver called a refreshment stop. The passengers spread out among the various shops there. Jiyon got himself a cup of tea and sat at a table on the front porch of a tea stall. At this time he saw the Ba'ul walking towards him uncertainly. Jiyon quickly made a decision how to address the man and said: "Maharaj, please come and sit here if it pleases you. May I offer you some tea and snacks?"

"Thank you, most gracious Babu. I will accept your kindness. But please do not call me Maharaj. This insignificant person is not worthy of that honor."

Jiyon ordered for him tea and a selection of sweets. Then he said: "My name is Jiyon Jana. I am coming from Calcutta for a vacation in Akyab."

“Ah, a big city person! I could tell. Perhaps a very educated man as well? I am called Sri Maug Rasiklal Sensufi.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Maharaj. Yours is a – er – an uncommon name. I mean, there is a first name and there is a family name. But there is much more there!”

“People I meet always bring up that subject. My original name is Rasiklal Sen. But I got deeply drawn to the Sufi tradition of the Islam. To acknowledge my abiding admiration for it, I added the ‘sufi.’ And I once was made most welcome by a Maug village. The Maugs – as you may know – are a sect of Burmese Bengalis that practice a combination of Buddhism and Hinduism. To honor their kindness to me, I added the Maug. And the Sri or Mr. I use before my own name to honor all that I have just said.”

“I see,” said Jiyon, but he really did not.

The tea and the sweets arrived and the Ba’ul started on them with great gusto – as if such a treat was rare for him. He now even said, with a childlike smile of pleasure: “It is not often I get such a treat!”

After a few moments he looked up at Jiyon and said: “You still look puzzled about my name. All right, let me ask you this: I saw that you are carrying a leather suitcase in the overhead rack. What is in it?”

“Well, I have a few changes of clothes. Clothes to wear when I am outdoors and when I am indoors. Indoor sandals. Underclothes. A toilet kit. A hand mirror. Towel, soap, hair oil and such things. Some medicine. A few books. A copy of the Bhagavad Gita my mother gave me to always keep with me. A diary, pens, pencils and so on.”

“So you are carrying in your suitcase all that you need as you journey alone to a far place. When you are home, your home houses you. When you are traveling, you house your home in your suitcase. It is the same with my name. I carry in it all that holds me as I too travel to a very far place.”

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The bus was on the road again. The man who sat next to Jiyon said to him: “I saw you having tea with Rasik Ba’ul. A finer man you will not meet in these here parts.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Well, you will not know to look at him now, but he is the richest man in all of Chittagong. Or rather he is the only son of the wealthiest family there. He finished his higher education in Bilet in a very big school called Oxford University. He became a doctor, but not the medical kind. He came back and started to act very snobbish and highbrow. He saw himself as an Englishman. He wore the finest Bileti clothes and cut quite an impressive figure around Chittagong. He spoke Bengali, his own mother tongue, in an affected way – as some Anglicized snobs do.”

The man looked at Jiyon’s face and saw intense interest there. So he continued verbosely: “Before he left for Bilet people liked him a lot. He now became so uppity that people began to not like him. But one day he met a Sufi mystic and fell under his spell. He fell under even greater spell of the mystic’s daughter. He asked his parents’ permission to request her hand in marriage. But the parents sternly forbade it. No son of that Hindu family was going to marry a Moslem. So Rasiklal went ahead without their blessing and asked for the girl’s hand in marriage. Her family agreed and more importantly, she agreed. Her family lived in a Maug village outside of Chittagong. The village welcomed the newlyweds warmly. So Rasiklal left his own home. When he did so, his father told him to consider himself disowned by his parents as far as any inheritance was concerned. But wealth no longer meant anything to Rasiklal. He settled in the village and started wearing peasant clothes and live from hand to mouth on a very meager income. He taught the village children in a ramshackle hut that served as the school. His salary was paid mostly in kind – rice, dal, vegetables etc.

“People marveled at how an Oxford doctor made such a full life with a simple village girl. Sadly, however, when the marriage was not even a year old the girl died of double pneumonia and some complications. There was not enough money to get her the best treatment available. This devastated Rasiklal. To make a long story short, that is how he came to be the way you see him today.

“His father later tried to make up with him many times, and implored him to come back and take charge of the family business. But Rasiklal said he was happy the way he was. People say that there is a great sadness smoldering within him, and he is trying to change that into a sublime sadness.”

3

AKYAB, BURMA

A dualism

Akyab, a town in the Akyab District of the Arakan Division of Burma, had all the aspects of a coastal frontier town inhabited by rough and tough pioneers. The wide waters of the Bay of Bengal, the ever-present breeze, the swaying palms – all these brought to Akyab a sense of a land that was not limited. It was as if the land was open on one side – open meaning unsealed or leaky. Onshore, three rivers met in the Akyab District and gave rise to many tidal channels and islands and lush forests. 'Civilization' was just coming here. Roads and bridges and buildings were being built by the British government. Rice farmers, loggers, builders, fortune hunters, smugglers – all these assorted men peopled the dusty streets and the port region of Akyab. Kaku, a contractor, had taken up temporary quarters here as his labor force worked on various projects in the Arakan Division. Kaku's family was settled in Dhaka. Jiyon had earlier dispatched a telegram and then journeyed for days by train and bus to get here.

Kaku was Uncle Jibon, Jiyon's father's only sibling. Unlike the father, who was just appointed Chief Judge of the High Court in Dhaka, Kaku was not a man with high formal education. He was, however, a self-taught man of deep learning – especially in the great religions and the Sanskrit scriptures. And also classical literature in the English language. In his youth he had traveled to all the important pilgrimages in India. There were two facets to him. Outwardly he was a tough businessman in an arena that rewarded the hardiest and the bravest of pioneers. Kaku was a flamboyant adventurer who loved dangerous assignments. Inwardly Kaku was a deeply spiritual man. Very few got to see that side of him, which he kept most private. Jiyon hoped very much to be allowed into that sphere, if only just a little. What fascinated him most is the dualism in Kaku: The outer adventurer and the inner spiritual man.

Jiyon had used his long journey to Akyab to do some reflection. As he neared Akyab, and especially after meeting the Ba'ul, he finally admitted to himself that he really wanted to be like Kaku. He wanted Kaku's life and all that went with it. He felt he had begun to see things in a much clearer light.

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Kaku was waiting at the bus station. Elated to see him, Jiyon quickly picked up his suitcase and got off the bus. As he and Kaku were walking out of the bus station Jiyon suddenly realized that he had not said a proper goodbye to the Ba'ul. The latter was nowhere to be seen. And then Jiyon saw his receding figure in the distance. He stared at it – in case the man would turn his head. As if instinctively, he did. He waved his hand and so did Jiyon. Then the Ba'ul pointed with his finger to Jiyon's suitcase and crossed his arms over his chest. Jiyon understood. The Ba'ul was asking him to hold his 'suitcase' close to his heart.

Kaku said: "I see you have met Rasik Ba'ul. That is a most remarkable man there. Some say he is a realized soul."

"What does that mean?"

"Simply put, it means he has seen or known God."

"It is interesting," said Jiyon, "how he has packed three great religions into his name."

"Three great religions and more."

In Kaku's quarters Jiyon bathed long to wash off the accumulated dust of days of travel and sat down to a fine meal Kaku's cook had prepared. As they talked over the meal Jiyon began to formulate in his mind how to express his dilemma to Kaku. But he was preempted. Kaku said: "I would love to have you stay here in Akyab with me. But now that you have finished your studies, I think the timing is right that you go through some kind of a rite of passage to the real life in the real world. I have a job about half a day's truck journey from here, and out in the middle of nowhere. My foreman came here yesterday to pick up some supplies and is returning early tomorrow, about 5 am. I suggest you go and spend some time in the pristine primitive jungle. You will see a place very different from the city life you are used to. You will be with a group of people very different from the intellectuals you associate with. What say you?"

"Absolutely, Kaku. I will be ready by 5 am. And thank you."

After Jiyon had a refreshing siesta they had tea. Then Kaku took Jiyon out to show Akyab by sunset. It was interesting to see a city virtually out of the ancient times, with groups of people reveling here and there after a hard day's work. That day

produced a most spectacular sunset for Jiyon. The sky flamed out and seabirds winged homeward over it. A hard edge of reality was brought to this scene by the tall masts of the ships in the port. Soon dusk began to fall and kerosene lamps were lit and hung in front of the stores. The lamps kept swinging in the sea breeze. Everywhere a light-and-shadow effect was created. Exhausted from the walk and with darkness now following dusk, they sat down in a cafe which was well-known for its fine Burmese dishes. They dined Burmese-style, with some twenty small bowls of different items spread on the table between them. Jiyon thought this was a good time to ask Kaku something. First he related his entire conversation with the Ba'ul and the Ba'ul's life story. Then he said: "Of course you probably already know his life story. This is an interesting man, but his life has nothing to do with mine. Yet I feel a deep sense of gratitude to him for spending the few minutes with me. I don't think I will ever forget him. What is that about, Kaku?"

Kaku replied: "Perhaps you admire in him that which you wish you had the courage to do yourself. There is a poem by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, called Gratitude to the Unknown Instructors, which goes like this:

What they undertook to do
They brought to pass.
All things hang like a drop of dew
Upon a blade of grass.

"People are afraid to acknowledge that life is as precarious as a drop of dew. If you have the right mindfulness, as you go through life you will receive instructions from such ones as the Ba'ul. But then, perhaps what you are really saying is that you feel a sense of sadness for this lone man?"

"Actually, that too."

"It is good that you can feel this way. Do not ever be ashamed of soft feelings."

Some time passed and then the conversation turned to the news of the family. Later, as Jiyon bit into a chunk of curried shad roe, he asked: "For the trip tomorrow do I need to pack anything special?"

“Nothing but your toothbrush – and even that is not essential because you can use the much more hygienic neem twig! The camp has everything you will need to live there. But there is something you could leave behind.”

“What is that?”

“Your logical or scientific mind. In the jungle, if you do not open yourself up to all kinds of things that are trying to enter you, if you try to let logic and reason filter your experience, this trip will not be very beneficial to you. You will not, for example, be able to absorb the spiritual essence of Shondhyasharosh Dweep.”

“What is Shondhyasharosh Dweep?”

“The Island of the Twilight Stork – as the British surveyors have called it – is a tiny island in a river. The road that we are building is to bridge the river. And the government has decided to run the road over this island so that they don’t have to build a long-span cantilever bridge across the entire river, but rather two small bridges. So this very pristine island will soon be sacrificed to civilization. You are just in time to see it the way it has been for eons and ages.”

“As you know, Kaku, I take some interest in animal life around the world. But I have not heard of a species of stork called Twilight Stork.”

“The Twilight Stork is not a stork. But go and find out for yourself.”

4

THE JUNGLE, ARAKAN, BURMA

An instructor

The cook had got up early to make a substantial breakfast for Jiyon. Precisely at 5 am the fifteen hundred-weight truck arrived noisily. It was carrying three laborers in the back. It was being driven by the foreman himself, Mushirul Ahmed. He turned out to be a person of easy smile and easy speech. Jiyon took an instant liking to him. He introduced Jiyon to the laborers as Chhoto Saheb, Saheb Junior. The laborers greeted him respectfully. Then Mushirul ushered Jiyon into the cab of the truck. By this time Kaku was up and came to say goodbye to Jiyon. He took the foreman aside and told him to look after his nephew well, but not to be so overly protective as to restrain his movement in the jungle.

Within minutes they were out of the town and in the open country, with a distinct coastal feel about it. Coastal birds as well as palms and coconut trees could be seen. As the truck proceeded apace Mushirul proceeded to give Jiyon some orientation.

"We expect to arrive at the camp about 4 pm. We'll make several stops on the way for tea and comfort breaks. There is not much in the way of towns along the route, but there are villages with tea stalls. We will stop at a village where we can get simple, and safe to eat, lunch. These stops will break the monotony of the trip.

"Now, in the camp we are about 3 dozen people. Thirty laborers, myself, two cooks and two general-purpose helpers. Additionally there are two military people – a Havildar and a soldier. The government has stationed them there for our safety, ostensibly. The real purpose may be to keep an eye on any suspicious activities in this politically sensitive area. Anyway, these two are very nice and friendly people.

"We run a community kitchen where everybody eats: Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists as well as two Maugs and one person with no religion. So we do not cook any beef or pork. There are some villages about one hour by foot, and villagers bring us fresh food daily: fish, chicken, goat, eggs, milk, vegetables and so on. So the food in the camp is quite good. Saheb likes his people to eat together and eat well. And our cooks are most resourceful. Don't be surprised if, in the middle of the Arakan jungle, you are served orange-flavored chomchoms!"

As he paused for a bit, Jiyon said: “Mushirul-bhai, tell me about the Island of the Twilight Stork.”

“Actually, Bhaijan, I better not. This is not something to be heard from someone else, but to be seen for yourself. So by telling you I will be spoiling a beautiful experience for you – the most beautiful experience in this mortal world, in my limited life experience.”

Presently they pulled up for a tea break. This was good, for Jiyon felt he needed some more strong tea after having woken up so early. He had two cups.

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The camp looked almost picturesque – a few tents and bamboo-and-tarpaulin sheds by the river. There was a large tarpaulin-covered area where people had gathered for the afternoon tea. Mushirul introduced Chhoto Saheb to all, saying that Jiyon was a scientist from the big city of Calcutta. The audience seemed to be most impressed and awestruck. Presently Jiyon was handed a steaming mug of tea. He chitchatted with the laborers who stood round. After a while a uniformed soldier with a single barrel shotgun slung over his shoulder came for tea. Jiyon shook hands with him. By this time Jiyon’s few things were put away in Mushirul’s private tent where Jiyon was also to sleep. It looked quite comfortable. All in all Jiyon felt very happy. The anxiety about the unknown and the uncertain dissipated completely. As he looked at the wide sky he felt that the logical scientist within him had taken leave for the time being.

Jiyon took a fifteen-minute nap and at about 5 pm, came out to go for a walk along the river. As he stepped out of the tent he saw Mushirul talking to the other military man who looked like a Manipuri. Seeing Jiyon, Mushirul said: “Bhaijan, come and meet Havildar Shantikumar. He goes to the island every evening to watch the sunset. He has kindly agreed to be your tour-guide today!”

The havildar was a tall man of athletic bearing, with a ruggedly handsome face. He shook Jiyon’s hand warmly and said: “I’ve heard much about you, Jana Babu.”

Jiyon was impressed by a voice that was both calm and cultured. The two of them started to walk along the river, downriver. There was no trail as such, but the riverbank was level and free of shrubs and walking was easy. Jiyon asked: “You come from Manipur, Sergeant?”

“My parents do. I have spent all my life thus far in East Bengal. So I am a little bit Manipuri and a great deal Bengali!”

The sergeant continued: “I take it that no one has told you about the Twilight Stork?”

“I have only heard that name. But no one would tell me what it is. There seems to be some mystery about it.”

“Not so much a mystery. But it a visual experience. People have done you a favor by not telling you anything.”

After about twenty minutes the island came in view. It was just a green mound smack in the middle of the river. Jiyon understood what his uncle was telling him: A single bridge across the river would have a great a span. But two relatively short spans to the island could serve the same purpose much better and at a much lower cost. Jiyon noticed that the green mound of vegetation on the island – low but densely leafy trees – was slightly askew. As they approached the island and came level with it the skewness became more pronounced. The mound was high at one end and its height gradually decreased towards the other end. Its profile thus had the appearance of a ‘comma’, standing on its two ends. Further down the river were visible two other islands. The sergeant found a clear patch of ground and said: “Now we sit here and watch.”

They sat in perfect silence as the hour of sunset approached and the sky reddened, seemingly with a fastidious slowness. A lone bird flew across the sky high above the earth, adding a tinge of melancholy to the failing light. A sense of some ritual ending spread over both land and sky. Then a lone stork appeared out of nowhere and landed on a treetop on the island. It was a magnificent bird of great size. The feathers on its back were nearly black, but glistened as a dark shade of blue in the low sun’s raking light.

Jiyon watched in amazement, then turned to the sergeant and said in a whisper: “The Greater Adjutant Stork!”

The latter silently nodded agreement. Jiyon’s eyes turned again to the sky. Nothing further happened for a few minutes. Then came another stork and sat on another treetop. Then two more. Then a few. Soon the green mound that was the island became dotted with these shiny, dark blue patches. The process kept going: one, two, a few, two, a few, one, several. Jiyon looked out to the western horizon – now crimson

– and saw how, over a tiny hamlet there, storks were flying from out of a cumulus cloud and towards the island.

All of a sudden the whole sky darkened. Swarms of storks approached from every direction and sat on the mound. Then, almost abruptly, all movement stopped. The mound was a continuous solid color – shiny, feathery dark blue. It looked like a gigantic stork, seated on the water's surface with its beak and neck tucked under its belly. The island itself had become one gigantic, brooding stork!

It was many minutes before Jiyon's thoughts returned to his immediate surroundings. He looked at the sergeant who now silently mouthed the words: "The Twilight Stork."

They sat and watched what spread out in front of them for another half an hour, in complete silence. It started to feel a little chilly. A fair-sized moon was up so that it was not very dark. They got up and started on their way back. Many thoughts crowded in Jiyon's mind, thoughts so wonderful that he felt greatly uplifted in spirit.

At length Jiyon commented to the sergeant: "Rather curious that nothing happened on the other two islands."



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“Perhaps because this island is special in some way.”

“When the road is built, all this … all this mysterious and mystical beauty will be gone?”

“Most sadly.”

When they were about half-way back to the camp they were startled to see a patch of gerua color under a tree. It did not belong there. Soon they realized that a person was sitting there! A little closer in, and they saw a gerua-clad monk who was now getting up. There was a maroon-colored chador draped diagonally across the monk’s chest. The monk was very young, with a boy’s face. This could be a Burmese Buddhist monk, thought Jiyon. But his head was covered with a wrap-around piece of cloth, rather uncommon for a Buddhist monk. The sergeant was the first to speak in an official voice: “Young Maharaj, what brings you to this part of the jungle?”

“I have traveled far, looking for the people who are building this road. I want to speak to their headman.”

“Well, in that case,” said the sergeant, “come with us and we will take you to the foreman of the project.”

“Thank you. I will.”

As they walked together, with the monk in the middle, Jiyon asked: “Maharaj, if you don’t mind my asking, what is this about?”

“I want to try to save the Stork Island from being converted to a thoroughfare. This is a very special place on earth.”

“I agree. But the people who planned this road are aware of the special quality of this island and nevertheless decided to proceed. Without any new information to offer to them, how would you hope to change their mind?”

At this time the sergeant interjected: “Maharaj, whatever case you want to make, your best bet is to make it with this gentleman right here. He is the nephew of the big boss who runs this whole project. He can speak to his uncle more effectively than the foreman can to his boss.”

“Excellent, then,” said the monk and looked at Jiyon. “I will explain to you why this island must not be disturbed.”

Jiyon replied: “Maharaj, let us go to the camp. We can sit down with hot cup of tea and then you can tell us.”

At the camp Jiyon found Mushirul and took him to one side. He pointed to the monk and said: “Mushirul-bhai, we have a guest we found wandering alone in the forest. Is it possible you could offer him food and shelter for the night?”

“Of course,” said Mushirul with a broad smile. “As you wish. May be the cooks can rustle up some fresh vegetables for our guest.” He paused a moment and added: “Your guest looks rather unusual. I have never seen one like this here.”

Jiyon came back and found that the sergeant had taken the monk to the kitchen area where the cooks had a roaring fire going, with cauldrons placed over it. The warmth of the fire was most inviting and this was a very private place to hold a conversation. The cooks were going about their own business and no one else was about. Jiyon asked for three mugs of tea. The cooks looked a little surprised to see the guest. Presently they brought them three steaming mugs of tea and some biscuits. The monk, however, did not touch the tea and the biscuits placed before him. In the eerie firelight and in its snug warmth the monk started to speak in his soft, mellifluous voice. There was an almost hypnotic, airy quality to the voice that grew as he spoke.

“The jungle is a living thing. Everything there is interconnected. Every tree is linked to every other tree. And then the jungle is also connected to the animal life and, to a lesser extent, to human life. But the humans, by their own actions, have distanced themselves from that primal empathy that God gave every living thing.”

The monk paused. Jiyon had a strange feeling that as the monk was speaking, his words were leaving his mouth and floating out and away over the river. The monk resumed:

“So like all living things the jungle has a mind. Short of being disturbed by humans, all the changes in a jungle occur because of feelings felt and decisions made in the mind. Notice that I do not say brain, but mind. And the mind is an actual physical place within the jungle. It is a special place where things happen beyond the knowledge and understanding of humans.

“It works much like the human body: all the news of the all the trees in all the reaches of the jungle is relayed to the mind. Then the mind sends back instructions. This is how the jungle lives and grows and copes and dies.”

The monk paused again and looked at his listeners as if to ask: “Any questions?”

Jiyon took this opportunity: “It is most fascinating what you say and I can see where you are going with this. There may even be some scientific basis to suggesting that the jungle is a living entity. But everything else you say is figurative or metaphorical. A very fine train of thought, no doubt. Far be it from me to stop you from thinking this way. But this is not what I can take to my uncle. He is the most open-minded and imaginative man I know and he may even feel sympathetic to your view. But this is not something he can take to the powers that be.”

The sergeant now added: “You are suggesting that Shondhyasharosh Dweep harbors a far deeper mystery beyond the homing storks. It would help your cause if you could give us some evidence of that. Well, evidence may be too strong a word. Is their anything you can do beyond the speech you have just given to induct us into your way of thinking?”

The monk kept looking at the fire as if mesmerized by it. He now turned his head towards his hosts and spoke: “Will you – just the two of you – steal away and come with me to the island at the dead of night?”

For reasons that Jiyon could not explain to himself, he now remembered Fazlul’s words to him: “You will come back with an answer, I am sure.” It seemed to him that in some strange way things were inexorably unfolding towards that end. He silently nodded. And he felt glad when, almost simultaneously, the sergeant also nodded.

The monk begged out of dinner, saying that he did not eat after sundown. He was offered a bed in the tent where Jiyon and Mushirul slept. But he declined, saying he slept in the open. He also said he did not need any blankets or pillows. As everyone was retiring, the monk settled himself right where he was – near the foot of a tree, under moonlight.

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At about 11 pm all was quiet and everyone was fast asleep after a hard day’s labor. Jiyon and the sergeant slipped out quietly and the monk joined them. Jiyon noted with satisfaction that the sergeant carried a heavy electric torch in addition to the service revolver in his belt. As they came to the river bank the sergeant pointed to a moored dinghy that belonged to the camp and said: “We best take it and go all the way on the river and to the island.”

In less than an hour they gained the island. The dinghy was pushed up on the land. The jungle here was dense and dark, but there was just enough light for them to follow

the monk safely. The monk led the way which he seemed to know well. He put his index finger across his lips and pointed to the canopy. Silence was to be maintained. The storks were not to be alarmed.

After several minutes of walk they saw a clearing and in the middle of it a shimmering body of water – best described as a waterhole. This seemed to be in the center of the island. The waterhole was approximately round, surrounded by a clear beach-like sandy expanse which in turn was bordered by the jungle. There was thus a hole in the canopy that could not be seen from the mainland. The monk signaled the party to stop just short of the clearing, and sit under a tree.

The monk knelt down on the ground and Jiyon and the sergeant sat flat on their bottoms on two sides of the monk, making themselves comfortable for whatever was in store. Rather than feel the thrill of adventure, Jiyon felt that his mind was going blank. It was as if the mind was being emptied for some purpose.

At this time the monk began to speak, airily and nearly inaudibly: "Now clear your mind of everything else but this place and this time. The Here and the Now. I know it is dark now. But soon you will see with your mind's light. So focus focus focus – slowly slowly slowly – now you are feeling sleepy – sleepy sleepy sleepy – you cannot keep your eyes open anymore – not anymore not anymore not anymore – sleepy sleepy sleepy. Now look!"

Jiyon and the sergeant both had fallen nearly asleep but now became alert. In front of them it had become light – almost like a full-moon night, like what Bengalis call jyotsna. But it was not a light from the sky. And it was of limited extent. It illuminated the waterhole and the beach but not the tree line. The canopy remained dark and the storks remained asleep. There was also a misty quality to the light – like some dreamscapes. Having taken in this scene both men turned their heads simultaneously towards the monk, expecting him to resume his speech.

The monk was gone. In fact, they saw that they were sitting next to each other with no space for a man to have sat between them. Jiyon pinched himself until he felt pain but nothing changed. He saw the sergeant looking intently at the well-lit vista before them. Jiyon also fixed his eyes to spot any activities there.

At the same time he now felt that a certain awareness that was seeded in the depths of his consciousness ever since he met the monk was now slowly rising to the fore – now that the monk was gone. He still did not know what it was but he knew it

definitely was something. Something pleasing and heart-warming. Jiyon wrapped himself tighter with his arms and at that moment he knew. It was a smell – it was a smell such as he never knew. Not the scent of a flower nor an animal nor a human. It was a compounded scent that could never be described in words. Perhaps someone adventured into the jungles of heaven, found the rarely blooming blue rose and extracted a bit of its essence. He then came down to earth and added to it equal parts of memory and desire. That was the scent it was. The scent of the idealized female. Jiyon would forever be in the power of that scent. The jungle had found a way to change him.

At this moment Jiyon realized something else: It was not a boy monk of tender age. It was a young woman in the fullness of youth.

The sergeant touched Jiyon lightly on the shoulder and the latter came out of his deep contemplation. Something was moving at the far end of the waterhole. Presently a small deer – which Jiyon recognized to be a doe – was coming out from behind the trees, crossing the beach and heading towards the water's edge. It was a strange-looking deer, more like a stylized painting of a deer. Jiyon remembered a photograph he once saw of the Gerenuk Impala of Africa, and had thought it could not be a real creature. This one looked much like that. Its walk was most dainty.

The doe gained the waterhole and continued on. The water was not at all deep, probably less than a feet even at the center. The doe stood smack in the middle of the waterhole in a most majestic posture, head held high. Right in front of the doe a dead tree branch stood, partly submerged in the water. Now something happened which startled the two viewers.

All of a sudden the entire canopy came alive. The storks woke up and swooped down to the waterhole in great numbers, causing the light to dim a bit. They were crisscrossing the entire lit volume. After a minute Jiyon realized that each bird was taking turns to be near the doe, sitting on the dead branch, facing the doe. It was as though some information was being exchanged. Jiyon imagined that the storks brought news of every tree in the far-flung jungle, relayed it to the doe, received necessary instruction and took it back to the trees. The mind of the jungle thus communed with the body.

This frenzy subsided as suddenly as it began. The storks were back in the canopy, asleep. All went quiet again. The doe slowly turned to go back the way she came. She paused as if in some afterthought. She turned again and came straight at Jiyon and

the sergeant. With very slow and deliberate movement she approached them and stopped only about five feet from them. They saw her deep, deep eyes that were translucent. And the wonder of wonders: Jiyon had a whiff of that smell again – this time so distinct that it got implanted permanently in his memory for smells, if there was such a thing. She held him in her gaze for a few brief seconds, then turned and retraced her path all the way back to where she came from. She disappeared. The light over the waterhole dimmed and was gone.

"Let's go!" the sergeant whispered and stood up. Jiyon followed suit. The sergeant occasionally flashed his torch light as they walked straight back to reach the dinghy. They found it parked on land just the way they had left it. They rowed back to the camp. All this time nothing was said by anyone.

The camp was fast asleep. Only the alert soldier hurried to see who was arriving. When he saw his boss he saluted and went about his patrol. Jiyon and the sergeant made their way to the kitchen fire which was still smoldering – hot enough to boil a kettle of water. The sergeant made two mugs of tea and they sat down by the fire. Only now did the sergeant speak, in a low voice: "I think hypnosis can explain everything. The boy-monk hypnotized us."

"That was my thought," said Jiyon. "But there are a few points that are not explained by hypnosis."

"My inclination is to accept the rational explanation with a few problems, rather than a supernatural explanation. But *you* are the scientist!"

"Well, a scientist likes to have everything explained. A small loose end can be fatal for his entire theory – no matter how well sewn up."

Jiyon considered for a moment whether to discuss the scent but decided against it. This decision virtually took away from him any arguments he could make in favor of the supernatural, if he wanted to. But he now felt that the scent was a most private gift and he would not share it with anyone – ever.

He asked the sergeant: "People in the camp saw the monk last night. Now he has disappeared. What do we say about that?"

"Let's say nothing at all. Let's wait for them to ask and then play along. I do not think we can relate last night's experience to anyone and hope to be taken seriously. And, after all, no one has any need for this information."

They had finished the tea and now decided to retire for whatever remained of the night. As Jiyon dozed off he remembered the scent and felt warm all over. It was as though the scent was lovingly putting him to sleep. He slept a most refreshing sleep.

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When Jiyon came for breakfast the laborers had already had theirs and left for work. Mushirul and the sergeant were lingering over tea. Jiyon got a big serving of puri-potatoes and a mug of tea, and joined them. “Good morning,” said the sergeant. “Mushirulji was just asking about the doe we brought in last night. He was most amused by it.”

Still not fully awake, Jiyon was confused by this statement. Then he quickly realized that the sergeant was cluing him in to something. He looked at Mushirul and said: “What amused you, Mushirul-bhai?”

“Well, Bhaijan, the way you two sat with her by the fire and tried to feed her tea and biscuits. Imagine a deer cub seeping tea from a mug!”

“Good! Because we thought that would be amusing, too,” replied Jiyon. “Is that a common deer species around here?”

“Not that I know of. It looked quite unusual. The word that came to my mind is Mayamrigo, the maya doe of our lore and a thing of our deepest psyche. That spirit doe all men are searching for all their lives. But I don’t know a whole lot about the animal life in this area and so cannot tell you how common or uncommon this deer was.”

“You are quite the poet, Mushirul-bhai,” said Jiyon, with a broad smile whose purpose was more to relax himself than to admire the poet.

“I have my moments! Anyway, I best be off now. I will leave you to your own devices. Explore the river basin, watch the bird life, venture into the jungle. Remember, as long as you can find the river you can find the camp. And when walking in the jungle it is always a good idea to memorize some visual markers. Even place some markers of your own here and there. We have some colored string you can take. Tie a piece of string to an occasional tree branch as you hike. I will be back around lunchtime in case you need anything or have any questions.”

Mushirul handed Jiyon a small army compass and a whistle, fastened to a strap to hang these from the neck. He then asked Jiyon to always get some fruits and a canteen

of water from the cooks when going on treks. Then the foreman went about his own business. Meanwhile the soldier had come to see the sergeant and the two were busy talking. Jiyon got the canteen of water and a few oranges and bananas and was off. He had full four hours before lunch. He would trek up river.

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A few days passed. Even in this unfamiliar and unpredictable setting Jiyon had fallen into some type of a routine. He would get up with the birds. Only people up then were the cooks who would rustle him up a healthy breakfast. Jiyon explored the jungle for several hours and returned to lunch which was at one. After lunch and before he felt sleepy from the effect of all that rice he set out again, this time for a leisurely stroll along the river. He came back for the afternoon tea. Then at dusk, every day, he and the sergeant went to view the island. The same scene unfolded there nightly, but it was never old. Although the same things happened every evening, the experience never seemed to be the same. The two men chitchatted about all sorts of things and about life in general.

One thing Jiyon came to appreciate in the jungle, for first time, is how the passage of time can be exquisite and nuanced. In his student life, from the time he got out of bed to the time he went to sleep, the whole day was just a blur. But now he noticed how the day broke; how dawn came in all its glory; how early morning was calm; how morning was bright; how late morning was noisy; and so on. Similarly, there was a sequence of progression of noon into afternoon. Then came darkness and senses other than visual had to be engaged. The growth of night was exquisitely textured.

Jiyon felt in his bones and his muscles a sense of physical wellbeing and a sense of litheness and fitness he had never felt in his sedentary Calcutta life. But something was happening to his mind as well. It seemed to want to attune itself to the vast sky, the wide open land and the flowing river. When he slept at night, he slept such a good sleep as he had never known. And each night, before drifting to slumber, he remembered the scent. This was in fact the moment he anticipated all day long.

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One evening during this phase when Jiyon was thus brought into complete harmony with all the jungle resonances, he felt unusually sleepy after dinner. He excused himself and retired. As he lay in bed the lullaby scent engulfed him as it did

nightly. And then that scent continued as an unbroken thread from his waking into his dream which commenced as soon as he fell asleep.



Mayapuri

Jiyon was out on what seemed to be an elaborate desertscape on an expansive canvas, brushed to indistinctness in soft wash tones by some whimsical painter. He was riding on a camel, but he was floating rather than moving in the camel's jerky steps. He was lost. Presently he heard a disembodied voice: "Mayacamel will carry you to Mayapuri, the far valley floor that is the scent's home."

Jiyon thought he knew the airy, atmospheric cadence of that voice which floated past him and on out to infinity. It was now acting like his tour guide, giving him directions. Jiyon was covering great distances up hills and down dales in very little time.

Time and again there came a decision point. Jiyon would ask: "Which way now, Voice?" The voice would reply with options, like: "Ahead is the Unknown. To the left is the Unseen. To the right is the Unmet." Then Jiyon would say: "Lead me, Mayacamel." The camel would turn right.

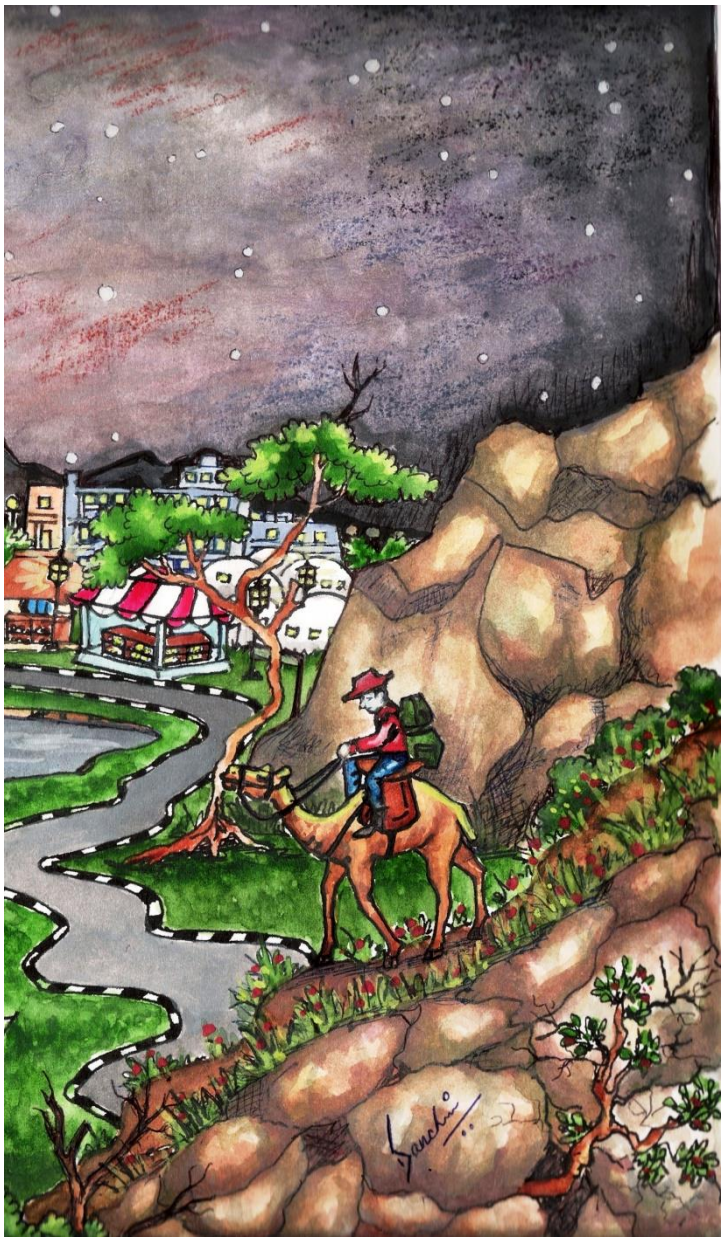
Finally he came to a place where two trails diverged. One went uphill and one downhill.

"Which way now, Voice?"

"Uphill is the skyblossom. Downhill is the dreamflower."

"Lead me, Mayacamel."

The camel turned downhill.



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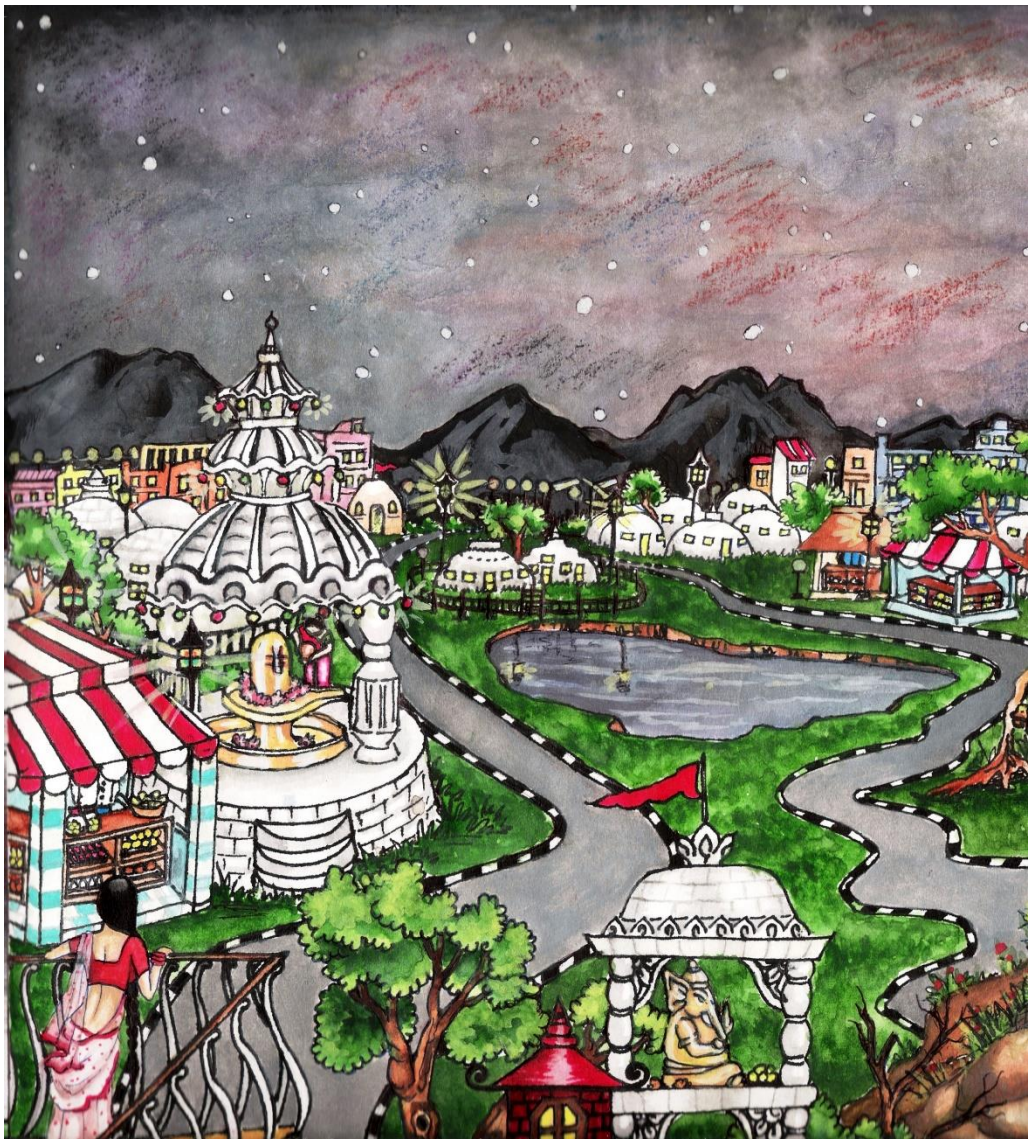
There, spread out before him was a valley that could have only one name, Mayapuri. Mayapuri – the unreal city. There were steepled temples and domed homes; asphalt roads and strange trees; well-stocked shops and multi-colored lamps. But everything seemed asleep, as though on an elaborate canvas brushed to drowsiness in soft wash tones by some whimsical painter. Jiyon heard the voice say: "Mayapuri."

Then the voice was gone. Jiyon was without a tour guide in an unknown surrounding. He advanced in slow, tentative steps now, in the camel's jerky steps. The smell indeed was all around him – whichever way he pointed his noise the smell was there. This had to be very near the source. But where specifically was the smell coming from?

Jiyon had an intense longing to become a part of all that lay before him, to make an end here. To sleep with everything that slept. But he missed the signs of wakeful stirrings on the balcony at the edge of his vision, for the view was blocked from him by a tree with strange, large leaves.

This was as close as he came to Mayapuri on Mayacamel. The tour was over. “Lead me, Mayacamel,” Jiyon said. “Sleep,” the camel spoke in the same airy cadence that Jiyon knew. He fell into deep, dreamless slumber for the rest of the night.

He would not remember the dream in any detail. Only a faint, faraway, fond memory of some journey would abide. And the scent would become a haunting for him from here on – in a most welcome way – as if to lead him to some overwhelming moment.



Sanchari De



Nearly two weeks after Jiyon arrived at the camp there was a vehicle going to Akyab and Jiyon decided to return. Not that he wanted to, but that the one-month deadline from Professor Sengupta had to be kept and within that time, he also needed to visit his parents in Dhaka. Jiyon decided that he would make full use of the month and at the one-month mark, if he could not get to Calcutta, he would send a telegram to Professor Sengupta. But before he left the camp, there was something he needed to discuss with the sergeant. He did so on their last evening of viewing the island sunset.

All this time the two had avoided talking about what happened that night on the island. Jiyon did not want to breach that silence but he needed to go close to that subject. So he asked: “About saving the island, do you have any thoughts?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. But it is nothing to do with ecology or any such thing. Those noble arguments will not work. But we saw that this is a small island and in the middle of it is a waterhole. When we walked on the island the soil felt soft and mushy underfoot. And the highest point of the island is hardly a foot above the water level in the river. So the argument can be made that the soil is not competent to withstand any traffic.”

Jiyon felt the sergeant had handed him a beautiful gift on a silver platter. He was elated: “You know, not only can this work, but my uncle would be grateful for bringing this to his attention. I will not have to do any pleading with him. Clearly, the government never surveyed this island when they planned the road through it. Somebody dropped the ball!”

And there was another matter Jiyon wanted to sound the sergeant out on. He asked: “Sergeant, have you ever thought of another line of work besides the military?”

“I have and I do from time to time. Before I became a sergeant, I was a specialist on automobile mechanics of heavy duty military trucks. I think that would be a good line of work for me.”

“What if someone in my uncle’s profession wanted to hire you?”

“That would suit me very well.”

“Sergeant, would you give me an address where I can contact you?”

Back at the camp the sergeant gave Jiyon a piece of paper with his address:

Havildar Longjam Shantikumar

251 APO

East Bengal

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Kaku was alarmed and astounded: “Jiyon, you have done me a great favor. I would have lost my face if I proceeded with the bridges to the island. I will go immediately to the government overseer and talk to him. These people would be eternally grateful to me for saving their faces.”

Thus the island was spared for the time being. But that was all Jiyon could do. He knew that the road could not be diverted too far from the island, and the encroachment of humans would soon drive away the storks. Shondhyasharosh Dweep was not long for this world.

On his last evening in Akyab Jiyon and Kaku went to a Momo joint and ordered all kinds of dumplings with assorted sauces – hot and mild. The shopkeeper came over and enthusiastically asked if Jana Saheb’s young guest would like to try some nappi. Kaku took one look at Jiyon’s face and told the shopkeeper: “Perhaps another time.” As they sipped fragrant tea Kaku asked: “Tell me about the jungle, if you feel like.”

“The jungle was wonderful, Kaku. Thank you. I think the jungle to me was another unknown instructor. But there is something I wanted to ask you about that. If I wanted to go into your profession, will you help me get started?”

“You should think carefully about giving up a promising scientific career. I would advise you strongly to not give that up. But if you are sure and if you have your parents’ blessings, I will do everything I can. In fact, you can slowly take over my business from me. I am getting too old for this type of work. There is nothing that would please me more than to hand over to you everything I have built. My two daughters would not want any part of it!”

Jiyon looked steadily at his uncle as he thought about this fascinating man. At that moment one of his strongest cases in favor of a scientific career dissolved completely.

He had always thought that a scientist was privileged to be a pioneer, to discover things that no man had ever known. But now he saw that the man sitting before him was the finest of pioneers. Every day he made inroads into nature's secrets. He brought humans into the pristine lap of nature. And all this he did from a life of complete obscurity in a most obscure corner of the world – in sharp contrast to the scientist in his limelight on the center-stage of the world.

So Jiyon's dilemma now was distilled into a single issue: "To seek in limelight or to seek in obscurity?" Jiyon did not have the answer to that yet, but he thought it was great progress to have distilled his complex issue into a single question. With great gusto he bit into a Shrimp Momo smothered in chili sauce.

5

DHAKA, EAST BENGAL

An answer

Jiyon arrived in Dhaka late at night. After a quick shower and a small snack he went straight to bed. This was the first time he was coming to this house, but he did not have the energy now to explore it. His parents did not wake him up in the morning. By the time Jiyon got up, readied himself and came to the breakfast table the Judge had already left for the court. The cook served him breakfast as his mother sat by him and poured him tea. They started catching up on all sorts of things in Calcutta, in Akyab and in Dhaka.

"Hello, Kakima, am I disturbing you?" said someone from behind Jiyon. Startled, Jiyon got up and turned his head. He saw a vision of pure beauty and loveliness and grace. His mother said: "Not at all, Noyona. Please come and meet Jiyon. And the tea is still hot and fresh."

The young woman advanced and faced Jiyon. Not a shy person in any sense, Jiyon felt disarmed and speechless. He half heard his mother's voice: "Jiyon, meet Mrigonoyona, our neighbor. She just finished her Bachelor's Degree exams in the Dhaka University. So you two are in the same boat – waiting for the results of the exams!"

Noyona smiled broadly as Jiyon mumbled something. She sat down at the far end of the table, accepted a cup of tea but declined the offer of breakfast. Good, Jiyon thought, she would stay a little while during which time I could recover and speak smartly. In the event he did. They started talking about college life, an easy subject on which to keep a conversation going. The mother took the opportunity to attend to matters in the kitchen.

A while later she reappeared with a fresh pot of tea and said to Noyona: "Please help yourselves. I have got something going in the kitchen." Noyona got up and came over to Jiyon's end of the table to pour the fresh tea into his cup. She was within a foot of Jiyon, and her sari rustled. That was when it happened. Jiyon nearly fainted. It was that scent – the otherworldly scent that he never thought he would ever smell in this mortal world again. It was unmistakably the scent of Mayamrigo from

Shondhyasharosh Dweep. It could not be any artificial smell one put on. Here, now, this had to be the very personal smell of Mrigonoyona.

Jiyon's reverie deepened. In the faintest of the faint layers of his memory something stirred. Something most indistinct and disjointed – a journey, a voice, a valley … Jiyon could not regain anything more.

"Are you all right?" asked Noyona when she saw Jiyon visibly perturbed. Jiyon recovered and apologized, mumbling something about lack of sleep. After they finished the tea Noyona got up and said: "Look at the clock! I came to invite you and Kakima to tea this afternoon and sat down here for two hours, drinking tea myself. I will go speak to Kakima in the kitchen. Hope you can come, Mr. Jana."

"Make it Jiyon and I will come."

"Hope you can come, Jiyon."

"I will be there, Noyona."

After she was gone Jiyon walked over to the kitchen and watched his mother cook, as he often did as a child. He remarked that Noyona seemed very nice. His mother replied: "That she is. We all love her very much. They are trying to marry her off and there is quite a slate of very fine candidates. Of course, before anyone else they asked us about you. We told them she would have to wait until you finished your Ph. D. But her parents did not want to wait that long, not even for a good catch like you!"

The tea at Noyona's was very elaborate. Noyona's parents were most pleasant and hospitable and expressed genuine interest in Jiyon's future plans. After a while Noyona invited Jiyon to come and see the flower garden. She needed to cull flowers for her mother's evening worship ceremony, she said. Jiyon welcomed the opportunity to be alone with her and savored every moment that he was next to her. At one point he said to her: "I am quite taken by your name, Mrigonayana – the doe-eyed one. A most unusual name!"

"Here is how it came about. My father is a surveyor who spends all his time in the jungles of the Sundarbans. So he wanted to name me Mrigonabhi, meaning a deer's fragrant navel. But my mother thought it was not a female name. So my parents compromised and named me Mrigonoyona. Personally, I would have preferred Mrigonabhi, for it carries a message for all men!"

"How is that?"

“Well, there is this story about a Kosturimrigo – the fragrant deer, what in English is called a musk deer. This deer smelled a most beautiful, most haunting and most otherworldly smell in the forest and was overpowered by it. He spent all his days going over hills and down dales to find the source of that captivating smell. So single-minded was he in his search that he threw caution to the wind. One day he lost his foothold and fell into a crevasse. It was a fatal fall. Just as he was breathing his last he realized that the smell was coming from his own navel, from the Mrigonabhi! A lesson is that when you find someone most fascinating, the roots of that fascination may not be in the object of your attraction but within you. So one should make very sure that a fascination that is of one’s own composing will not wear off, and the object of the fascination will not turn out to be very common.”

Jiyon *was* sure. He decided to act on it. He said: “While on that subject, I heard that there is quite a slate of fine candidates lined up for your hand!”

“I see. Ill news runs apace!” Noyona smiled.

“Why *ill* news?”

“None of the candidates is to my liking.”

“What if one more name were to be added to the slate?”

“That name would receive very favorable consideration.”



Sanchari De

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The Judge came home about six in the evening and the family sat together in the living room. This was a good time to broach the subject, Jiyon thought. So he made a great preamble about disappointing his parents by giving up a bright scientific career. He laid out his plans to go into business with his uncle. He ended by apologizing again.

“I am not disappointed,” said the Judge. “We both want you to do what makes you happy. We want you to do something that enriches your life, some work that returns something to you. So you have my unreserved blessing.”

Jiyon looked at his mother. She said: “There is only one thing I would add. Do not think that you are giving up science altogether and going into something completely different. Nothing that you gain in life goes to waste. All this education you have had will serve you well, although in ways you may not realize. You will be a better builder for having been a good physicist. So whatever you do, go into it wholeheartedly and without regret.”

She stopped as if tired by that long speech. Then she suddenly sprang to her feet and said: “Almighty Shiva! This means that you could marry Noyona after all! I better run next door with the proposal immediately, before it is too late. Would you like me to?”

Jiyon smiled a smile which his mother could well read. She was off. The father now turned to his son: “Jiyon, tell you the truth, I am glad of the choice you made. Your uncle my younger brother is a man I respect and admire more than anyone I know. If something of his has passed to you, then that is a great blessing in itself.”

Jiyon went out for a long walk that would take him to visit Kaku’s family. He felt a sense of euphoria he had never known. He reexamined the question: “To seek in limelight or to seek in obscurity?” And now he saw that he did not have to make a choice after all. He would have limelight within his home and obscurity in the outside world.

Jiyon Jana looked at the storefronts where evening lamps were being lit. He saw a temple in the distance and heard evening bells. The faintest memory of another place of temples came to him. Memory and desire were mingling in him. He felt happy to be alive in this bustling, busy world that surrounded him now on the outside. And he felt eternally thankful for the gift of the inner sanctuary he had received: Shondhyasharosh Dweep.



THE TEMPLE OF THE HEADLESS GODDESS



ছিন্নমস্তার মন্দির

1. The split-second decision

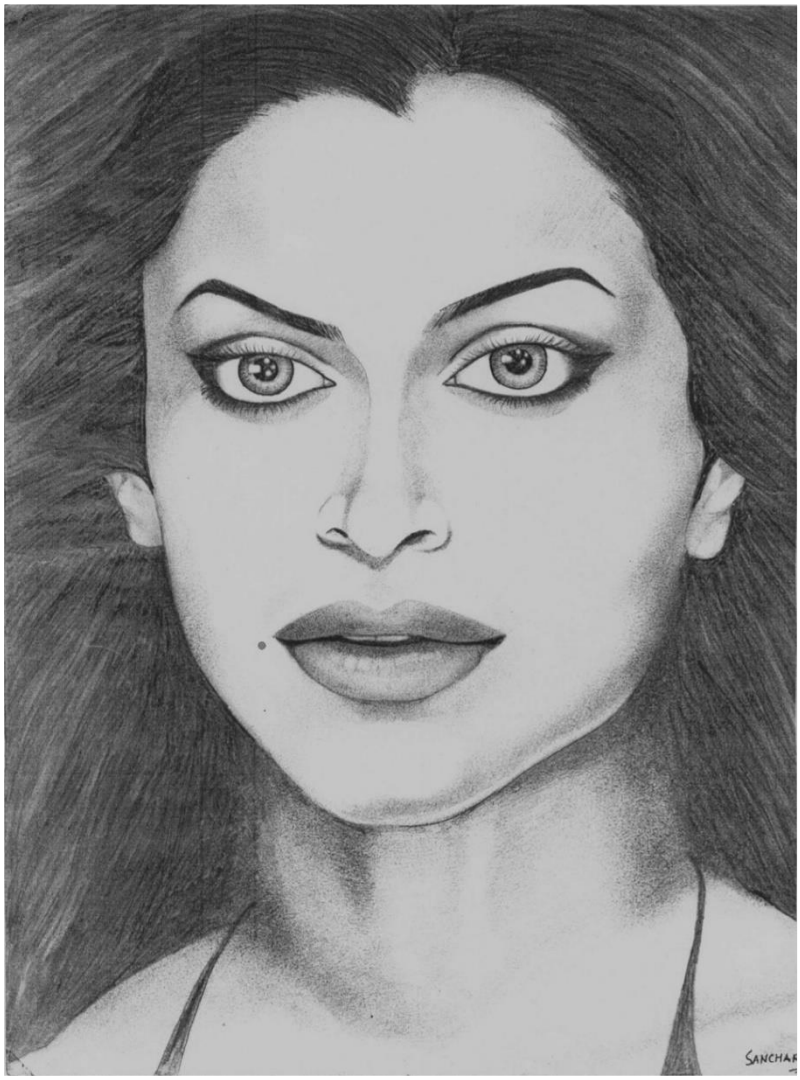
 ery early on some Saturday mornings, Col. Nigel Dorchester of the British Royal Engineers liked to throw his 12-bore shotgun, his pith helmet and a water canteen in the back of his Jeep and head for the jungles outside Kohima to hunt and to spend some quiet time by himself. This was almost like a meditative period for him. For within himself, the military engineer was a deeply reflective and sensitive person. And such quiet breaks were necessary too. For he was right in the middle of the war brewing in the China-Burma-India Theater and he himself was in the thick of things. He had major responsibilities in overseeing the construction and maintenance of the precarious, hill-hugging, zigzagging and mud-logged Kohima Road that was to be used for moving troops and materiel.

In normal times Kohima was a small, sleepy Naga village nestled in the mountains. But with the war brewing it had taken on great importance for the Allied Forces. The main India-Burma Road, the Ledo Road, started at the railhead of the Assam-Bengal Railway at Ledo. But a second India-Burma Road, the Kohima Road, started at the railway station at Dimapur, then passed near Kohima and south to Imphal and on to the Burma border. It is this latter road that Col. Dorchester was in charge of for the Royal Engineers. By this time there had gathered in Kohima a substantial British community. Also, large numbers of people from Assam and Bengal swelled the population. They were here to take part in the great boom surrounding the construction work.

On this Saturday morning Nigel's wife Sylvia came out to the door of their official bungalow on the Garrison Hill, kissed him goodbye and wished him good-hunting. She still looked very sleepy – very sweetly so.

Nigel paused a moment and looked at her. He thanked his stars as he did almost everyday. For Sylvia was a stunning woman – even in her unmade everyday appearance. Her face was as well-proportioned and statuesque as that of a Greek goddess carved by the finest sculptor from the finest marble. But after having been drawn to the face, one was immediately drawn to the eyes – so large and so clear that they almost looked like two miniature sapphire pools. And from within the depths of that blueness they seemed to speak. The listener became confused whether to listen to her mouth or to her eyes. She smiled first from her eyes, a smile which then radiated all over her face, curving down and ending in the next couple of seconds in the corners of her mouth – which then curled ever so delicately. All this beauty was heightened

by the beauty spot, right next to the right corner of her mouth. Her figure was slender and shapely – but not at all skinny. In contrast Nigel, at 6 feet 8 inches, was a powerfully built man, with his upper arms as thick as a tree branch. The two of them made a very fine couple, the social centerpiece of the British community in Kohima.



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Sylvia said she would spend the day shopping with her friends. Nigel snapped a picture of her with his mind's camera and in this uplifted mood, took off. This time of the morning there was no traffic on the road and he quickly arrived at the isolated roadside general store where an entry trail to the deep jungle started. He had never used this particular access before, but had his eyes on it. Nigel parked his Jeep, put on his helmet and picked up the gun, the belt of cartridges and the canteen of water.

The trail itself was faint and looked to be rarely used. Nigel followed this trail for a while and then decided to leave it. As he made his way into the thickening and darkling jungle he kept a mental note of his bearing and also of some features of the trees he passed. As he advanced he reflected on his life and on how blessed it was. He thought of England and imagined the prosperous life there that surely awaited Sylvia and him. He even wondered if a knighthood was in the stars. He was, after all, still very young and rising fast in the service of the Empire.

There were the usual jungle sounds: the birds chirping, the woodpeckers pecking, the squirrels making noise in the leaves. But so far no games in sight. The game Nigel expected was deer. Several times he had returned home with a deer laid out across the back of the Jeep, with its head and the hind legs spilling over the sides. There was great feasting in the British community then, with each family receiving a large package of fresh venison. Nigel hoped to have the same luck today. He hoped not to come face to face with a wild boar, for he did not want to kill an animal he would not eat.

Nigel sensed a very subtle change in the environment around him, so subtle that only seasoned hunters could sense it. He tried in his mind to identify what it was. Suddenly he saw in front of him a trail. He had come round to join the same trail! But it was barely visible here, being overgrown with shrubs. He decided to keep to the trail from here. Whatever change was occurring in the environment around him was intensifying. And now he understood. The jungle sounds were disappearing and a strange hush was falling. Nigel never had this experience before. He stopped to take a good look all around him. There, ahead of him and just at a bend in the trail, he saw a tail. And then the back of a small deer, a roe buck.

From here Nigel did not have a good shot. So he stealthily advanced as he watched the tail. The deer did not seem to sense danger. It slowly moved up the trail. When Nigel came round the bend he had a full view of the animal from the rear. And that view evoked in him complete disbelief. The deer had a single horn, smack at the midpoint between its two ears. For a moment it seemed like a creature from out of mythology. It must be the rarest freak of nature, Nigel rationalized.

As the deer bent down to munch on some shrub it made a rustling noise. Nigel used this noise as the mask to pull the hammer back on his gun. The deer did not respond to the click. But before he could level the muzzle the deer moved again. It was still unaware of its predator. As this stop-and-go pursuit continued, Nigel’s patience

began to wear out and his urge to take the shot grew stronger. This is an impatient mistake many hunters make, Nigel knew. Keeping his quarry in sight, he paused a moment to take stock of his entire situation. It was at that point that his instinct told him something. May be the deer knew all along that he was stalking and was actually leading him someplace, to whatever caused the jungle to go so portentous. Just as he began to move again the jungle opened up before him and there was this strange vista: Under a very ancient-looking, sprawling banyan tree there was an even more ancient looking temple made of stacked up, quarried stone blocks that were crumbling all over. The trunk roots of the banyan tree nearly strangled the temple from most every direction, snaking through the joints of the stone blocks. But there was a main entry door that was left clear, framed neatly by some of the invader roots. Nigel saw the doorway from a sidewise angle and could not see what was inside.

Suddenly at this moment, with a quick dart, the deer fled to the temple and entered the doorway. Seeing his quarry now trapped, Nigel advanced quite resolutely and came facing the doorway. The opening was wide, giving full view to a tableau – some very colorful straw-and-bamboo-and-clay images. The colors were oddly vivid and glowing in the background of everything so old and crumbly. But the sight itself was blood-curdling. The central goddess, Nigel recognized, was the Hindu goddess Kali. She was wearing a garland of severed heads – all in clay image of course. She was holding in her right hand her special kharga, the curved, crescent moon-shaped broad sword. With this sword, shown as dripping blood, she had cut off her own head and was holding the severed head in her left hand. The head hung by the hair which the goddess was holding tight in her grip. Streams of blood were shown spurting out from her severed neck, and two grotesque-looking females on either side of her were shown drinking from these spouts. There were a couple of other images on either side of the severed-head Kali. The deer was standing right in front of Kali, looking straight at Nigel, seemingly defiantly as if to say: Shoot if you dare! It was as though it had entered an inviolate sanctuary.

Nigel’s dilemma was acute. On one hand his trigger finger was itching. Beyond the satisfaction of successful hunting and enjoying fresh venison he now had the vision of this most unusual trophy hanging on the wall of his trophy room. And later it would be in his home in dear old England. What a conversation piece! A real life unicorn, no less. On the other hand his well-honed instinct for danger told him not to do this. Do not defile a native temple, he heard a small voice within him say. In a brief second that would prove fateful, he made his decision. He fired.

The deer fell to the ground, moved its legs for a few seconds and went very still. But the major part of the blast had caught the goddess. There were pock marks all over her front – in a circular pattern. And the right arm had broken off and fallen to the ground, shattering there and freeing the ominous kharga.

Nigel went through the doorway and poked the deer with the toe of his boot. It did not move. He picked up the kharga. It was the real thing, heavy and sharp – not the customary tinsel likeness. Nigel was a swordsman himself, having fenced at Sandhurst. In his strong hands he waved the kharga like a sword and it felt good. This was a good day. Two rare trophies in one day! Nigel came out to rest a bit on the temple stoop and take a drink of water. He would next decide how to fashion a sled from tree branches to haul the deer.

Directly he turned he saw three men standing in the courtyard of the temple, looking steadily at him. He knew what these most fierce-looking creatures were. They were Kapaliks, the rough-living, ganja-smoking, hooch-guzzling, half-naked worshippers of Kali, with long flowing beard and long matted hair. Even from here he could smell the foul odor of their rarely-washed bodies. Their eyes were blood-shot from smoking ganja and teeth eroded and reddened from chewing betel nut. The man in the center was unusually tall and broad, bigger in fact than Nigel. The other two were small men. Even for a brave soldier like Nigel the sight spelled great fear and foreboding. Instinctively, he pulled back the second hammer of his double-barrel shotgun.

For a creature looking this vile, the big man now spoke in a most gentle and cultured voice: “Saheb, you have defiled our temple and killed our goddess’s creature. It had done you no harm. It is time for you to atone. But do not be afraid of us. We will do you no harm. We are here only to tell you about the Legend of the Curse of Chhinnomosta, the Headless Goddess.”

2. The nameless danger

The recent surge in the population of the Kohima area caused the powers that be to appoint a full-fledged British Civil Surgeon for the area. Doctor James Reed, FRCS, the new appointee who had arrived only two months ago, had a little respite from work this Sunday afternoon. He sat in his quarters behind the hospital, sipping tea and reading some old English newspapers that had just been passed on to him from another compatriot. The phone rang. It was his friend Brigadier Clive Barker, Commander of the Kohima Garrison. The caller said: “Jim, sorry to cut into your leisurely Sunday, old boy. But Nigel Dorchester just called. He sounded most distraught. He said he is in some kind of a jam and would like to see the two of us right away. Can I pick you up in a few minutes?”

“Of course,” said Dr. Reed. He kicked away his comfortable slippers and reached for his shoes.

Nigel received them in the front room of his house, the sitting room. He then went inside and came back with a tray holding a bottle of brandy and three glasses. Brig. Barker was surprised at this and asked: “Where are the servants?”

“I gave them all a week off. Also the gardeners and the driver and the bodyguard. It is just me in the house now.”

“What about Sylvie?”

“I sent her this morning to Dibrugarh to stay with our friends there for a week or two.”

“What’s going on, Nigel?” asked Dr. Reed sharply.

“Well, it is a long story and I will tell it to you now.” Nigel laid out the full story in great detail, ending with his encounter with the three priests. Then he continued: “The curse, you see, is that I have exactly a week to live. On the seventh day precisely at midnight I am to die by beheading. In the meantime, however, I am personally in no danger. But when I asked them if anything will happen *during* the week, they said that people around me that are close to me would be in grave danger. That is why I am choosing to have no one around me.”

The brigadier and the doctor leaned back in the sofa, feeling uncertain as to what to say. Col. Dorchester was a highly regarded officer and a valued colleague, and his

narrative just now was delivered in a most solemn manner. There was no question of dismissing this whole thing with a curt “What rot!” Each visitor took a long draft of the brandy. Then Brig. Barker asked: “Did you bring back the deer and the kharga?”

“The dead deer they took away with them, and went somewhere. I took this opportunity to pinch the kharga. I figured that I should at least get some tangible thing out of this mess.”

He went inside and brought the kharga. It shone in the afternoon light and looked much bigger here than it had in the temple. It had a most menacing look about it, perhaps because the sharpness was all too obvious. The two visitors looked at it with uncertain curiosity. Nigel put it back in one corner of the room, standing it against the angle of the wall, handle end up. It stood there as an immediate symbol of a nameless danger.

At last the brigadier, the seasoned military professional, spoke: “My first reaction is to dismiss all this as so much supernatural mumbo jumbo. But it may be that we are looking at a very earthly murder attempt. They are letting Nigel squirm for a week. Then they will break into the house and extract their revenge. This may be an all too human doing.”

“I agree,” said Dr. Reed. “Let’s take this as a serious threat and make our plans accordingly. Since Sylvie and the servants are away, Nigel is the only person in danger. So we can concentrate on *his* safety.”

Now the three friends conferred. Today was Sunday. Midnight at the end of the next Friday was the ordained appointment with death. In the meantime a strict routine would be followed. First, Nigel would take a week off from work and tell his office that he would be unavailable during the week. He would in fact stay indoors during this entire period. Second, all of Nigel’s meals would be cooked and delivered by the brigadier’s personal staff. Third, every evening at dusk four armed soldiers would arrive and station themselves on four sides of the house. Between them they would watch the entire perimeter. They would leave after sunup. There will be only one soldier posted during the daylight hours. Every evening the brigadier and the doctor would visit and have meals here and stay as long as they could. The doctor was a bachelor and the brigadier’s family was in Bristol. So this would work out fine. Nigel now looked visibly relieved.

3. Jiyon Jana comes to Kohima

Like most contractors who worked on the Public Works Department projects in Assam and Bengal, Jiyon Jana had also heard about the construction boom in the Kohima area. The PWD was helping the military build the India-Burma Road and opportunities there were plentiful. The work was also challenging and the reward was most generous – in consideration of the difficulty and the danger of the projects. Not only was the terrain here remote and inhospitable but the war brewing there made the situation infinitely more dangerous. Jiyon felt a little left out in not having a piece of this action. Also, it would give one substantial bragging rights to say: I built a part of the India-Burma Road. The difficulty for Jiyon was that from Khulna – where he made his home – to Kohima was a long way away, and it would be a hardship on his family. He did not want to uproot the family nor stay away for long periods of time. From time to time Jiyon verbalized these thoughts to his wife.

One day at dinner Mrs. Jana said: "Jiyon, why don't you and Longjam go to Kohima, just to get a sense of things. You have friends there. They will show you around. After that, if you still want to work there, we can all move there for a couple of years. We can rent out this house. This is not as bad as it sounds. It may even be exciting."

Jiyon's heart leapt. It was only 8:30 pm now. He knew Longjam did not eat his supper until 9:30 pm. So he hopped on to his Jeep and was off to commiserate with his friend and lieutenant.

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Monday evening was the first evening after the plan was in place. The brigadier and the doctor arrived separately in their cars near 6:30 pm. It had started to get dark. Dr. Reed went straight in. Brig. Barker went around the perimeter, chatting a little with each of the four soldiers stationed there. The soldiers – two Gurkhas, one Bengali and one Assamese – did not know anything about the danger beyond what they were told: the possibility of a night attack from anarchists. Anyway, each of them now was thrilled to speak with the boss of all bosses.

Colonel Nigel Dorchester's bungalow was rectangular. There was a frontage road that ran the length of the entire complex – a row of similar-looking bungalows. Behind the bungalows began a forest that merged into the wild hills beyond. Except

for the front which was open to the frontage road, the compound of the colonel's bungalow was walled in with a solid brick wall about six feet high. Thus the only access to the backyard of the house was through the front door of the house or through the two side garden gates, also front-facing. These two gates were now kept locked. The soldiers were posted just outside the brick wall. A Gurkha soldier took the front, the Assamese and the Bengali two sides and the other Gurkha the back.

Since there were two neighboring bungalows on the two sides and the front of the house was a thoroughfare for the neighborhood, it seemed that the main direction from which the attack might be expected was from the forest in the back of the house. Besides his rifle and the ever-present kookri, the Gurkha soldier here carried a powerful electric torch. There was a mango tree right outside the back wall of the house and its low thick branches reached well into the backyard. The soldier stationed himself under this tree, sitting with his back against the wall. The tree was easily climbable. It was decided that if any suspicious noise came from inside the brick wall, a soldier would climb the mango tree and look inside with the help of the torch. If needed, soldiers could then dangle from the tree branch and drop into the garden. A routine was established: every fifteen minutes one soldier would take a walk around the perimeter, checking to see that the fellow soldiers were all right. Of course each soldier carried a whistle.

Satisfied with the arrangement, Brig. Barker came inside the house and found his two friends seated around the large round dining table, enjoying whiskey. He joined them. The dinner had been brought in his car and the driver had set the table. When they were ready, all they had to do was to serve themselves.

Now a game of cards ensued. More whiskey was poured and some delicious appetizers of shingaras were found in the dinner basket. The evening progressed quite uneventfully. A very elaborate dinner was had. The brigadier contentedly lit a cigar and said: "Why don't we stretch out on the sofas in the sitting room?" To this Nigel replied: "Actually, I prefer to be here in the dining room. Somehow it feels safer, being further away from the front of the house." Brig. Barker agreed. This room certainly felt more homelike, what with everything telling of a woman's loving touch. There was a large framed portrait of Sylvia on top of a cupboard. As if to echo the brigadier's thought, Nigel added: "This room reminds me most of Sylvie."

At around 11 pm the two visitors got up to take leave. "Do you have a weapon handy, Nigel?" asked the brigadier. Nigel nodded and then said: "If nothing else, I

have the kharga!" and laughed. The kharga, in fact, was now standing in one corner of the dining room, near the back door. "That gives me the creeps," said the doctor. He then checked that the back door and the windows were secured. Then they all came out to the front door. They said goodbyes. Nigel closed and bolted the front door behind the visitors. Dr. Reed took off. Brig. Barker checked with the Gurkha soldier in the front. He said that there was nothing to report except a strange animal approaching from the forest. As soon as it saw movement of the soldier behind the house, it ran back into the forest.

"What was strange about the animal?" asked Brig. Barker.

"Sir, it was difficult to see in the dark. But Sher Bahadur said he thought it was a small deer with a single horn in the middle of its head."

The soldier then added: "Sir, it is probably just fear of bhoots, but each of us has a premonition that something evil may be approaching from the dark – from out of the forest that is." He shivered visibly as he said this.

Brig. Barker knew that bhoot meant ghost. He said: "What nonsense! Keep your chin up, Soldier!"

They saluted and the brigadier moved on. He advanced a few steps to the side of the house to a have view of the forest. Somehow it did seem to have a sinister aspect to it. It was almost thinkable that something or someone or some danger would materialize from out of that forest. Brig. Barker was now not so convinced anymore about the "nonsense" bit he told the soldier. As he leaned back in the backseat of his car, the seasoned military leader had a rising feeling that the situation was not entirely under control.

That night both Dr. Reed and Brig. Barker slept with a light on in their bedrooms and their service revolvers loaded and close at hand. Still, both slept badly.

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Jiyon and Longjam checked in to the Dak Bungalow in Kohima, a most comfortable place to stay in. A friend had arranged this and also loaned them a Jeep and a driver. The Dak Bungalow had a restaurant with tables strewn out on the open grassy lawn. The food was simple but tasty. Tea service was available all day. So the two visitors – both given to culinary pleasures – felt they were off to a good start.

The following morning they went to see the British engineer in charge of the construction of the India-Burma Road for the PWD, a man named Mr. Bernard. Jiyon had brought a letter of introduction from a high-raking PWD officer in Khulna. Mr. Bernard read the letter and smiled: “Most welcome, Mr. Jana and Mr. Shantikumar! Actually, the introduction is not necessary. Here in the PWD circle we are well aware of your many adventurous exploits. I am very happy to meet you both.” So saying, he called in a colleague of his, Mr. Pannel, and made the introductions. Mr. Pannel looked at them most admiringly. Presently coffee was served. It was rather unusual for high-ranking British PWD officials to socialize with Indian contractors thus.

The two engineers then took out a large map and pointed out such orientation landmarks as the Deputy Commissioner’s Bungalow and the hilltop tennis court. They then showed Jiyon where jobs were still open for bidding. They suggested that the two visitors go and check out the sites, and also talk to some of the contractors currently working in the area. Then Mr. Bernard said: “If after this you wish to work here, any of these jobs is yours for the asking. We hope you will. Also, we are in charge of the civilian work only. If you would like to meet Col. Dorchester, the man in charge of the constructions from the military end, we will be happy to arrange an introduction.”

Jiyon thanked the sahebs profusely and borrowed the map. The two were off scouting the job sites. As they left they noticed both the sahebs staring at them with great curiosity in their eyes. Longjam said: “I did not know we were subjects of gossip in the British expatriate community here!”

“And they don’t even know the half of it,” said Jiyon with a smile, referring to fact that many of their exploits were never told to a third person.

4. *Jai Mahakali, Ayo Gurkhali*

During the morning of Tuesday both the doctor and the brigadier called Nigel to check that everything was all right. The four soldiers on sentry duty last night were sleeping all morning this morning. In the afternoon Brig. Barker asked his Duty Sergeant to send Sher Bahadur to his office. He came, saluted and stood stiffly at attention. As superior officers go, he was used to talking only to a sergeant. He was now uneasy standing before the Garrison Commander.

"Sit down, Soldier" said the brigadier. "Tell me exactly what you saw last night."

"Sir, I was pacing along the back wall of the house, keeping my eyes peeled on the edge of the forest. It was dark, but there was a little moonlight. Suddenly I saw some movement there and stood still. Then there came out a small animal and started moving towards the house. It was moving haltingly, taking a few steps and stopping. As it reached the halfway point to the house, I could see that it was a baby deer. And what I saw then caused me to freeze – I am sorry to say, Sir. It had only one horn! Not one of the two regular horns, but just one horn midway between his two ears. When I saw this I lost control and my rifle fell to the ground with a thud. The deer darted back into the forest. I am very sorry, Sir. I am generally courageous when it comes to a human threat, but…"

"Never mind that. Tell me, have you ever heard of something called a unicorn?"

"No, Sir. I have not."

"Have you ever heard of a one-horned deer?"

"Sir, actually, earlier that very evening before you and Doctor Saheb arrived, Colonel Saheb came out and spoke to me. That was most nice of him to thank this insignificant person for guarding him. Then he told a very living story about seeing a one-horned deer during a hunting trip."

"What do mean by a living story?

"It is as if he makes you see the deer when he tells the story."

"All right. Do you want a different assignment?"

"No, Sir. I would like to be exactly at the same post tonight, Sir."

“Very good. That’s what I would expect from a soldier from the Gurkha Brigade. Let me hear that great Battle Cry.”

Sher Bahadur suddenly snapped to attention, took out his kookri, held it high in the air in his right hand. With a puffed chest, he shouted: “Jai Mahakali, Ayo Gurkhali!”

That is the battle cry that had put struck fear in the minds of enemies in a many a battlefield of the World. For it means nothing less than “Glory be to Kali. The Gurkhas have arrived!”

The brigadier could see the old pride had come back to the soldier’s face. He said: “Very good. Dismissed.”

Sher Bahadur gave a long salute and left. Brig. Barker lit a cigar and propped his feet up on the desk. He needed to think now.

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About the same time the Dr. Reed took a call from his friend Mr. Bernard of the PWD. After exchanging pleasantries Mr. Bernard asked: “Jim, I was trying to reach Nigel at his office but they say he is off for a week and is not to be disturbed at home. You are his best friend and also his doctor. Do you know what this is about?”

“Yes, Frank. He is suffering from fatigue and I prescribed a week of uninterrupted rest. But if it is something urgent...”

“Not at all. It can wait. Let him rest well. Is Sylvie all right?” In a most innocent way, every British man in Kohima had a little throbbing in his heart for Sylvia Dorchester.

“Sylvie is fine.”

“Good. I just thought that Nigel might like to meet two great jungle adventurers who happen to be in Kohima just now..:”

When Dr. Reed expressed an interest, Mr. Bernard filled him in on the background of Jiyon Jana. After they said goodbye it occurred to Dr. Reed that this story, coming just at this time, was a curious coincidence. He also felt a little ashamed for not telling Mr. Bernard that Sylvia was away. But he now had to go to surgery and he resolutely put everything else out of his mind.

5. "Something evil this way comes…"

The brigadier was a little late coming to Nigel's that evening, nearly 7:30 pm. It was quite dark. He found the front door open. He went in and his driver started to bring in the dinner from the car. Inside, Dr. Reed was seated alone at the dining table, sipping whiskey. He said: "Clive, Nigel is not here. I called out a few times, but no response. He may be in the bathroom. So I helped myself to a drink. It has been nearly fifteen minutes since I came."

"I will join you. Let's give it a few more minutes. Then we will have to go and check the bathroom."

But as the brigadier was pouring his drink, there was sound of footsteps from the rear veranda. Then the rear door opened and Nigel walked in from the dark, a garden ewer in his hand. "Good evening, chaps. I was just watering the garden."

"Watering the garden! This time of night! What's the idea?" asked Dr. Reed.

"Well, I just this evening realized that with the servants gone, the garden was not receiving any water at all."

"This is very dangerous. Even though the backyard is completely walled in, someone might overpower the guards and drop down from the mango tree. Next time do the watering in full daylight," said Brig. Barker.

The appetizer today was chicken kabobs which went very well with the drinks. Also, the tension in the atmosphere was relieved. They started on the dinner.

At one point Nigel went to the bathroom. Dr. Reed took this chance to say to Brig. Barker: "Somehow this evening he looks like a man in a trance. Do you think something impelled him to go out in the dark and expose himself to danger thus?"

"To tell you the truth, Jim, I am quite confused myself." As Brig. Barker said so, Nigel returned.

There came from the backyard the sound of something moving in the thick-hung mango leaves, followed by the shrill call of a night bird. The three men looked uncertainly at each other as if to ask if they should go and check. But the answer to the question came in the form of a loud, piercing scream from the back of the house – the scream of a hysterical person. The brigadier sprang to his feet and said "Sher

Bahadur" and ran out the front door. The two others followed. Brig. Barker did not see the soldier who should have been in the front. He must have gone to the back to see what was wrong. So Brig. Barker now circled the house, pulling out his service revolver as he did so. When he gained the back of the house he saw a soldier lying on the ground and the other three bending down over him. A lit torch was lying on the ground, its strong beam pointing towards the forest. As the brigadier examined the soldier on the ground, who indeed was Sher Bahadur, he asked the others not to touch the torch.

The doctor arrived. "Stand back, let me have a look," he said to the soldiers. He examined Sher Bahadur for several minutes. Then he looked at Brig. Barker and said: "He has fainted. There is nothing wrong otherwise. But I would like to take him to the hospital immediately." He looked at the three soldiers: "Please help me put him in the back of my car. Clive, Nigel, I will be in touch tomorrow morning."

After the doctor's car was gone, the brigadier got the three soldiers together, back at the same spot where Sher Bahadur had lain. They said they had heard the scream and came running, and saw Sher Bahadur lying on the ground. He had made some unintelligible sounds, almost sounding like "Sher, Sher … horror, horror…," and then went quiet.

Now the brigadier examined the grounds and noted the position of the torch. Then he extinguished it. Near it he saw a freshly broken twig from the mango tree. He looked at the edge of the forest. No movement there. It just looked most ominous. He remembered the words of the soldier that night: " … something evil approaching…"

The same Gurkha soldier now said: "Sir, it seems as if he saw something approaching from the forest. When he shone the light on it, he saw such horror that he became catatonic and then fainted."

"It certainly looks that way," said Brig. Barker. "Can you boys carry on by yourselves the rest of the night?"

"Sir, absolutely, Sir!" said one.

"All right. Stay together now in a group and patrol around the house. I will send reinforcement."

The brigadier sat with Nigel for another fifteen minutes, but no one spoke. No one had any appetite for dinner anymore. Then the brigadier said: "I need to get back to the garrison and see to relieving these guards. They have suffered a tremendous

shock. But, after this incident, nothing more is likely to be attempted tonight by whatever it is that is coming after you. I think you are safe. I will call you in the morning."

Nigel sat there, broodingly staring at the photo of his wife on the cupboard. Brig. Barker knew he must be missing her very much right now. Suddenly he felt very sad for his friend. He touched Nigel on the shoulder and said: "It will all be over soon, my friend."

On his way back to the garrison, Brig. Barker turned the situation over in his mind. This was no longer a theoretical threat. Some tangible damage had been done by whatever it was there in that forest. He remembered Sher Bahadur's words about dealing with a human threat. If it were something human, that soldier could have dealt with it. The brigadier knew well how brave a Gurkha soldier was. All in all, he – commander of a garrison of 3000 men in an advance war front – now felt that he was out of his depth.

6. A lunch in the Dak Bungalow

Wednesday morning came, as all mornings do. The brigadier had not slept at all. He was glad when the first light broke. He sat on the front porch of his quarters and took his first sip of tea. It was almost like a reviving tonic. It was not yet 6 am. He was surprised when he saw, this early in the morning, the Civil Surgeon's official vehicle pull up. The doctor sat down and poured himself a cup.

"Clive, Sher Bahadur will take a little time to recover. We stayed up with him all night. We are doing the best for him. There is nothing wrong with him physically. But he has suffered a tremendous shock. He is now babbling on, saying 'sher, Sher … horror, horror…' I am consulting with the Army Psychologist in Calcutta by wire."

"Thank you for all you are doing for my man, Jim. I will leave him in your good hands then. Just let me know if I can do anything to help. Now, as I was thinking about this whole business, somehow I got the feeling that may be we are not handling this right. May be we are out of our depths."

"Go on."

"Well, we are two Englishmen trying to face this business in a foreign land and a foreign culture – a business that may have cultic and religious sides that we know nothing about."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear from you. I have exactly the same concerns and what's more, I have a fine solution."

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"Longjam, I am not sure this is for us. I mean, I like the area, the hills, the jungle. I like the wild frontier aspect of this place. I like especially the openness of the sky here. But all this military activity all over, their tanks and heavy vehicles and the smell of petrol and cordite, the warplanes constantly flying overhead – these unsettle me."

Jiyon took a sip of tea, giving a chance for Longjam to respond. It was about 7 am and they were sitting on the lawn, having breakfast.

“I am in agreement. But I think Bhabiji had a good suggestion. You came here and you got this out of your system.”

“Yes, she is very wise in such matters. So when we leave tomorrow morning, we will leave with a full heart and no regrets?”

“Full heart and no regrets.”

They noticed a soldier on a motorcycle pull up. He went to the desk clerk. The clerk pointed towards where they were sitting on the lawn. The soldier came over to them, saluted and delivered an envelope. It was addressed to Mr. Jana. Jiyon opened it and read the handwritten note on a piece of plain paper:

Dear Mr. Jana:

My friend Dr. James Reed and I would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience. If you would be so kind, please let the messenger know when and where we might meet.

Yours faithfully,

Clive Barker, Brig., Commander Kohima Garrison

Jiyon consulted briefly with Longjam. The soldier offered him a writing pad and a pen. Jiyon wrote:

We are leaving Kohima tomorrow morning. Please come to lunch at the Dak Bungalow today at 1 pm if this suits you.

J. J.

The soldier saluted and left. Jiyon told the desk clerk he would have two guests for lunch. The clerk promised to put out a special lunch.

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Introductions were made all around and the four sat down around a most showy lunch table that had been set for the purpose. Somehow the Dak Bungalow sensed

that some big muckety-mucks were coming and went out of their way to put out a fabulous lunch. Right now, there was a large round plate of assorted kabobs at the center of the table. The sahebs were served whiskey. Jiyon and Longjam took pineapple squash. The brigadier began: "Gentlemen, we have heard much about you. But we are here for a specific purpose. To ask for your advice. So let me get right down to it."

Brigadier Barker started on a most detailed and nuanced narrative, taking care to not leave out anything that he knew about the matter. He reproduced Nigel's narrative about the hunting trip almost verbatim. He nearly brought alive for the listeners the sinister feel of the forest behind the Dorchester house that hid some nameless evil, something the very sight of which could put a brave Gurkha in a catatonic state. He stopped, saying: "Now the good doctor will report to you on the condition of Sher Bahadur."

The doctor did an equally good job of describing his part. Then everybody fell silent. In the meantime the next course of mulligatawny soup had been served. Everyone picked up the spoon, quite unmindfully.

After a few minutes Jiyon spoke: "Longjam, I am still thinking. Please go ahead and ask any questions you may have."

When Longjam asked his question the two sahebs were visibly startled: "I take it that you have of course checked to see that Mrs. Dorchester is indeed safe in Dibrugarh?"

At length Dr. Reed stammered out an answer: "Why on earth … I mean … that is … why would this be a concern at all?"

"Oh my God, Jim, I am such a damn fool! That is the first thing I should have done," said Brig. Barker.

"You mean they could have gone after her?" asked Dr. Reed.

Longjam took over: "Let us leave the reason aside for the moment. I suggest that you make inquiries immediately. And please humor me on this: Do not let Col. Dorchester know that you are making such inquiries."

The brigadier signaled to his driver to come with paper and pencil. He scribbled something on a sheet of paper and said to the driver: "Please go to the garrison and tell Sgt. Saxena to send it right away. Tell him this is personal and confidential. Then

come back for us." He turned to Longjam: "I expect to get an answer by tomorrow late morning. The British community in Dibrugarh is close-knit and if Sylvie is there, it would be most easy to find out."

Now Jiyon at last came out of his deliberative phase and asked his question: "This Legend of the Curse of Chhinnomosta … have you made any independent attempts to find out what it is? Beyond Col. Dorchester's description, that is. One could have asked at the roadside general store, for example."

"We have not done that either, although now that you bring it up, I see that we should have," said an increasingly confused Brig. Barker.

The serving of the main course now brought a welcome pause. Each got a huge plate with a shaped mound of fragrant rice pilaf in the middle and some ten little bowls of delicacies arranged in a circle around the mound. The manager of the Dak Bungalow himself came and hovered round. The brigadier looked at him and said: "You spoil us!" The manager was pleased as punch. With great exhortations to the diners to enjoy the fare, he quietly withdrew. The liveried servers stood at attention at some distance.

The brigadier felt the need not to spoil the lunch with dark thoughts right now and so went to another tack: "Mr. Jana, we initially came for your advice. But it seems to me that we could use some help. Will you help us out with this whatever-it-is?"

Jiyon asked the two saheb's indulgence while he consulted with Longjam in Bengali. Then the two of them conferred. At length Jiyon said to the sahebs: "As you know, we are set to leave tomorrow morning. But we will be happy to postpone our departure until Sunday morning if you can help us with a couple of issues. The first is that it is too late to change our train reservations for tomorrow and get new reservations for Sunday. The trains are usually packed weeks in advance."

"Don't worry. We will take care of it. What is the next thing?" asked Brig. Barker.

"Well, I need to send a message to my wife about the change of plans, but it may not arrive in time for her not to worry. But the military may have a faster way to send a message."

"Please write down your message. A local officer in Khulna will hand-deliver a transcript of it to Mrs. Jana first thing tomorrow morning. What else?"

"That's it. In that case, let us finish the meal and discuss strategy over coffee."

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Coffee was served in accompaniment of mango pudding topped with mango jam. The fine meal and the cooperative agreement just reached put everyone in an upbeat frame of mind. Jiyon picked up the thread of conversation. He looked at his wristwatch and said: “It is now nearly 3 pm, but there is still a few hours of daylight. There is no time to lose. So Longjam and I will start for the temple right away. We should be able to finish there before dark. We will see what we can find out there and at the general store. Now, Brigadier, we will visit the perimeter of Col. Dorchester’s house about twelve midnight. Please tell the soldiers that if they see two tall men in leather jackets, they are to look the other way. They are not to challenge us or talk to us, no matter what we do.”

“Consider it done,” said Brig. Barker. As he said so he took off his revolver holster from his belt and handed it to Jiyon. “Keep this. I have another one. I do not have any extra ammunition on me right now but this is fully loaded. Also, in my vehicle there is a five-battery hunting torch. I will loan it to you as well.”

Jiyon accepted the offer, thanked the brigadier and said to both the sahebs: “Now, I take it that if I asked you to drop the whole matter and leave Col. Dorchester to his own fate, you will not agree?”

“Most certainly not,” replied Dr. Reed. Brig. Barker nodded his agreement.

“Then here is something else I want you to do. We do not have time to plan out your time at the colonel’s this evening. So go early to his house while there is still daylight. Eat quickly. Make some good excuse and leave together, directly you have finished eating. Starting tomorrow we will plan out the evenings in detail. Please do as I say. Let us meet for breakfast here tomorrow at eight.”

The sahebs were a little taken aback by this forceful instruction, but nodded agreement. They all walked to the car. As they car was pulling out, Dr. Reed rolled down the window and asked in a very low voice: “Mr. Jana, are lives at peril?”

“Great peril. But follow my instructions and we will be all right.”

The brigadier now peeked through the window and asked in an equally low voice: “Whose lives?”

“Yours. The two of you.”

7. The horror by firelight

They easily found the trail to the temple. Now it was only 3:30 pm. The walk was quite pleasant and the trail – although obscured in places – was easy to follow. However, as they advanced, the jungle grew denser and the light began to wane. It soon became clear that the calculation of daylight hours was not very meaningful for this place. Jiyon was glad he had the five-battery hunting torch. He checked it and found the batteries were fresh. So far the light was still plentiful, resembling approximately early evening. But no telling what was ahead. Longjam had the charge of navigating and although the trail was clear, he made mental notes of several features around the trail.

After about half an hour the jungle suddenly opened up to a clear area, and there it was! The banyan-strangled temple, just as the brigadier had described it. Everything here was eerily quiet. Not even the wind played in the leaves. The banyan tree had a very dense and wide canopy which made the temple area especially dark. They came to the front door and saw the idols. As Jiyon shone the torchlight on the images, the colors glistened brightly. The scene itself was such that if a child saw it, he would be traumatized for the rest of his life. Although Jiyon and Longjam were prepared for this sight, even they felt a little weak in the knees. And yes, the central goddess was all shattered. The circular pattern of the damage was clearly indicative of a shotgun blast. There could be no doubt that what Col. Dorchester described had happened happened.

They carefully removed their shoes, made a reverent bow to the goddess and entered the temple. Inside it was quite dark. As Jiyon shone the torchlight on the walls, the remains of a very colorful ancient fresco could be seen. It was a 360-degree scene as one stood in the middle of the temple hall. From the tiny paint patches that still remained, no forms could be discerned any longer. Before coming out Jiyon examined the shattered right hand of the goddess. It was reinforced inside with iron braces that had continued into the shoulder. It was clearly designed to carry a heavy kharga – the genuine article.

As they came out and peered into the semi-dark courtyard they saw at the edge of the clearing the backside and the tail of a baby deer. Jiyon shone his torchlight on it and it moved away a few steps. They moved closer and it moved another few steps. They understood. It was leading them someplace. They followed. As soon as its head could be seen clearly, they saw the single horn. No mistaking it!

The jungle around them now was quite dense and the sunlight had nearly gone. But there was another light. Somewhere up ahead, it seemed, an open fire was burning. The unsteady flame from that firelight filtered through the jungle to where they were standing. This light grew as they approached the source. Longjam touched Jiyon lightly and pointed to the holster. Jiyon took out the revolver and cocked the hammer. He held it at the ready as they now came to see before them a sight that caused Logjam to clasp Jiyon's arm in a vise grip. Jiyon himself felt sick and nearly retched.

In the middle of a cleared area of the jungle there was a fire pit. It looked like the place of yajna, the Hindu ceremony of fire sacrifice. A roaring fire was burning, fueled by tree twigs and larger logs. The flame leapt several feet high. From where they stood the flame was the first thing they saw. Behind the flame was laid out on the ground a completely naked corpse, in the supine position. It looked aged, for it was bleached very white. It was also slightly plump, probably from putrefying. The corpse was headless. On the stomach of the corpse sat a huge Kapalik in the cross-legged lotus position. The Kapalik was completely naked and his ink-dark complexion sharply contrasted that of the bleached corpse. The Kapalik was a fierce-looking creature. His head, face and body were covered with a profusion of hair. At the feet of corpse and on the other side where the head would be, two smaller Kapaliks sat cross-legged on the ground. All three Kapaliks seemed to be in a stupor, perhaps from drinking country hooch or smoking ganja. They took no heed of the interlopers. The baby deer was now snuggling up to the head Kapalik and nuzzling the corpse.

Jiyon signaled to Longjam to retreat. They gained the temple and sat down there for a few minutes to recover. Nobody spoke. Then they followed the trail from there. They needed constantly to use the torch to check that they were on the trail. To their great relief they now began to see sunlight again as the canopy began to open up. Only now did Jiyon ease the hammer of the revolver forward and put away the weapon. Without any further problems they arrived on the main road and to bright daylight. It was just after 5 pm. What they had just seen seemed most unreal now in this light. It was as though they went to the matinee showing of a horror film in a darkened theater. When it was over, they came out and saw broad daylight.

There was only one shop where the trail met the road, the general store. In one corner of it, tea was being served. Jiyon and Longjam were most grateful for a reviving cup of tea. They started talking to the man making the tea and cleverly brought up the subject of the Curse of Chhinnomosta. The man said: "Oh, everyone

hereabouts knows the story. But everyone has his own version. If you wish hear the real authentic version, you should come tomorrow morning and talk to the Yogi."

"Who is the Yogi?"

"He is a sadhu who comes and sits at the edge of the veranda every morning and smokes his hukkah. Nobody knows much about him. But he is a close friend to Kapalik Shavajagarak."

"Kapalik Shavajagarak?!"

"I thought you knew, since you went to the temple in the jungle. He is the head Kapalik there. He is said to be possessed of great powers. Even his name means the Waker of the Corpse. Anyway, the Yogi can tell you everything."

"About the temple in the jungle, do the local people visit it often?"

"No. There is a general understanding that the temple is to be left alone. Stories of stark horror are told to keep people away. There is talk that Kapalik Shavajagarak actually conducts ceremonies there and brings corpses alive. There is a story dating back about twenty years that a corpse was left with the Guru. Some days later, the dead man was spotted walking about normally in Imphal."

"When will the Yogi be here?"

"He is usually here from ten till noon."

Jiyon said they would return the next day and got into their car. They had given the driver the day off, and Longjam was driving.

After a while Longjam asked most tentatively – as if dreading the answer: "Boss Babu, what was that horror we saw?"

"I am not entirely sure, Longjam, but what I think we saw is the cultic ritual of Shava Sadhana. Shava means a corpse and Sadhana means worshipping. So this is the ritual of worshipping the goddess Kali with the aid of a corpse. The worshipper sits near or atop a corpse, or near a burning corpse and implores the goddess to come and enter the corpse so that he can commune with her in mortal flesh and blood."

There was a long silence. Then Longjam asked again: "Boss Babu, that corpse – how did its skin get bleached so white? And how did it get so plump?"

Jiyon looked steadily at Longjam and asked: "Are you quite all right to drive?"

“Yes, Boss Babu, I am fine.”

“Longjam, that corpse was not bleached white. Just white. And it was not plump. It was shapely.”

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On the way back from lunch at the Dak Bungalow, Brig. Barker asked his driver to first drop off Dr. Reed at the hospital and then go to the garrison. The two friends sat silently. Then the doctor started, hesitatingly: “About Sylvie…”

“I know. I will let you know tomorrow morning as soon as I hear back from Dibrugarh.”

“It seems unlikely that these priests would go after the wife. After all, she did not do them any harm. Nor did we, for that matter. Why should our lives be in danger?”

“Who can tell? As we just found out, we missed a great deal about this business.”

“Yes. Those two chaps are sharp as a whistle. I can see why their reputation precedes them. Mr. Jana seems to be a remarkably refined person.”

“I checked them out. Just after you left this morning I sent a wire to Khulna. I got the response before coming to lunch. That’s why I so readily loaned him my revolver. He has a Master’s Degree in Physics from Calcutta University. He then had a scholarship to do a Ph.D. in Cambridge. But he gave it all up to become a jungle adventurer. His father is a distinguished Judge in Dacca. And Mr. Shantikumar is an ex-sergeant with the Bengal Command. So I think we can trust them implicitly.”

“Amazing that they should fall in our laps just now, just when we need exactly the help only they can give. So you take the danger to us seriously?”

“Yes, and I am glad you brought it up. I want you to give your driver the rest of the week off. I want to place one of my men in that spot immediately. He will be with you all the time. Another man will come and station himself in your sitting room at night.”

“Is all this really necessary?”

“Well, Nigel is fully protected. As a military officer I am protected anyway. My driver is also my bodyguard. And I always carry a sidearm. You are the only one who is completely exposed.”

“I see.”

8. The night fright

They arrived near Col. Dorchester's bungalow shortly before midnight and parked on the main road. From here they would walk. They decided to sit in the car until it was midnight. Longjam asked: "Are we looking for anything in particular here, or are we just looking generally?"

"Well, the enclosed garden in the back of the house interests me. It kept coming up in the brigadier's narrative. First, we heard that the colonel was doing something there in the dark – watering or whatever. Second, the scream of Sher Bahadur followed some noise in the garden. Third, Sher Bahadur collapsed not anywhere else but under the mango tree, the only thing that provides an access to, or a view of, the garden. Fourth, Sher Bahadur was looking at something with his torch. You would not use a torch to look at something coming from the forest because the object would be too far. It had to be something in much closer quarters. And lastly, since Saturday evening, the colonel is the only one who has had access to the garden"

"So the theory would be that Sher Bahadur heard the call of the night bird in the garden, climbed the mango tree to see if anything was amiss and shone his torch?"

"Something like that," replied Jiyon. He looked at his radium-dial wristwatch and said: "Let's go."

As they walked Longjam asked in a low voice: "Do you have any ideas what to expect?"

"Not really. But we have had a nasty shock this afternoon. So let's steel ourselves for anything."

As they neared the house they saw the guard in front of the house. He also spotted them, looked for a few seconds and then continued his pacing. They passed another guard and to the back where the third guard was posted. Here Jiyon stood for a minute and took in the view. The forest edge in the distance did indeed look darkly mysterious, perhaps because this is what they were expecting. But it would be the likely direction from which any danger would materialize.

Jiyon looked at the tree line and found a small group of shrubbery that would be about half-way between him and the tree line. For a brief moment he shone the torch upon that clump of shrubbery. He could not see much – the beam of the torch simply

did not reveal much at this distance. So Sher Bahadur must not have been shining his torch in that direction, or if he did, he must not have seen whatever frightened him there.

Now they continued and circled the house and came to the back again. Everything seemed to be dark and quiet inside the house. No lights were on. Jiyon handed the torch to Longjam and started to climb the tree. It was quite easy to do so and soon the garden was in full view. The night was somewhere near new moon and light was very low. But Jiyon did not want to be waving that extremely intense torchlight in the garden. It could easily attract attention. As his eyes grew accustomed, he could now see the broad features of the well-manicured garden. It looked picturesque and well kept. Nothing was out of place. The pathways among the garden were neat and free of leaves. However, a large patch in the back was bare. It looked as though it had been recently denuded of shrubbery and cultivated. Clumps of dark soil could be seen. In the middle of this patch was a round object planted, looking much like an old-man cactus. Jiyon now decided to briefly shine the light upon it. Longjam reached up and handed him the torch.

As he quickly turned on and off the light, Jiyon saw in that brief second a whitish mound. No other features could be discerned. Now he considered the situation in his mind. Should he leave things be or should he jump into the garden and inspect closely. He came down and conferred with Longjam in a whispering voice. Longjam said: “Freshly turned earth in a mystery story means only one thing. I think we best go in and check if something is buried there.”

They managed to get into the garden noiselessly. They quickly walked through the garden and came to stand between the house and the white barrel cactus. From here they would have a view of the other side of it. They came close to it, only a couple of feet away. Jiyon whispered in Longjam’s ear: “I will turn on the light just for two seconds. Take a good look.”

He did. And they took a good look. Longjam retched, but fortunately did not make any noise. Jiyon kept his nerve. He dragged Longjam by the hand back to the mango tree. In less than a minute they were outside the wall. There Longjam sat down, with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out in front. Jiyon stood, leaning against the mango tree. The guard in the distance looked curiously at them, perhaps unsure if to offer to help. Jiyon said to Longjam: “Take several deep quick breaths.”

When Longjam looked a little better, but not a lot, Jiyon said: “I think we have seen enough. Let’s go back.” In another thirty minutes they were in the well lit Dak Bungalow, the night clerk greeting them warmly. Jiyon asked: “Is there any possibility to get some tea at this hour?”

“Absolutely no problem, Sir. I will make it. It will give me chance to have some. Have a seat, please.” They collapsed in the deep sofas in the lobby.

9. Sylvie

Neither Jiyon nor Longjam could sleep. So they were at the breakfast table on the lawn well before 8 am and were sipping tea, waiting for the two sahebs to arrive. They arrived precisely at 8 am. After the exchange of Good Mornings and How Are Yous and I Am Fines they sat down round the round table. From what was on offer the sahebs opted for Scotch eggs, fried eggplants, toast and marmalade. Jiyon wanted only toast and Longjam a bowl of puffed rice and milk. The sahebs noticed their frugal fare but did not comment. They could see that the two were out of sorts. So Brig. Barker commenced the conversation: "I expect to hear back from Dibrugarh any time now. If the message arrives while we are here, they will bring it out to me. Mr. Jana, what is your thinking about Sylvie?"

"Please describe Mrs. Dorchester as well as you can."

A little surprise, the brigadier nevertheless answered promptly: "Well, the first thing about her that anyone will tell you is that she is a statuesque beauty. She is about 5 feet 8 inches tall, square face, blond hair, very shapely body, slender built. Her eyes are unusually large and pale blue. Very fair complexion, not sun-burnt like us most British people in India. She is probably in her mid twenties."

"Is there something about a beauty spot?"

"Upon my word, Mr. Jana, how do you know this?! Have you seen her here in Kohima? Yes, indeed, she has most well-placed black spot near the right corner of her mouth."

Even as he finished, a soldier arrived on a motorcycle. He saluted the brigadier and handed him a sealed envelope. The brigadier tore it open and read. Without raising his eyes from the message, he mumbled: "Sylvie is not in Dibrugarh."

The two sahebs looked with supplicant eyes at Jiyon as if he could tell them where Sylvia was and that she was safe and sound. Jiyon simply said: "Finish your breakfast, Gentlemen. We have much to talk about this morning."

Everyone ate in uneasy quietness. They finished and the waiters cleared away the table and placed a fresh pot of tea. Jiyon took the teapot and filled everyone's cup. Then he sat back in his chair, looked steadily at the two sahebs and said: "I am so sorry to have to tell you that Mrs. Dorchester is dead."

He paused and saw the two listeners slink in their chairs. The authoritative military bearing of the brigadier suddenly looked limp. The doctor looked as if he was totally confused. Jiyon said: “Please get a hold of yourselves. There’s more bad news.”

He gave the sahebs ample time. Slowly, both sat up and gulped down the hot tea. The doctor now looked at the brigadier and seeing that the color had come back to the latter’s face, said: “Please continue, Mr. Jana. How would we ever bring ourselves to break this news to Nigel?”

“I will come to that in a moment. Now, you are tough professional men, so I will give this to you straight: Mrs. Dorchester was beheaded. Her body is now in the jungle, behind the temple of Chhinnomosta, being used in some cultic worship ritual. The ritual is designed to bring her back to life. Her head is in a garden patch behind Col. Dorchester’s bungalow. It seems that someone has planted it there, like a tree sapling, hoping it will grow. It is buried in the soil up to the chin level and the blond hair is nicely draped around it.” Jiyon stopped for his listeners to take all this in. They were completely silent. When a full minute passed without any response from them, Jiyon continued: “Now, to the issue of informing Col. Dorchester. There are only two nights left in his ordeal. If he survives you can tell him about his wife. If he does not, why sap his energy now with this terrible news?”

At last Brig. Barker found his voice. He asked, quite feebly: “Mr. Jana, you have seen these …uh…er… portions yourselves?”

“Yes, we have both seen both these portions with our own eyes.”

Another silence. Then Dr. Reed asked: “Where do we go from here, Mr. Jana?”

“We have to proceed carefully. There are two immediate issues. First, informing the civilian police. Think about that and its very large implications. Second, collecting those portions and administering the last rites. There are huge implications here as well. We are outsiders, and we don’t have a great deal to say on these points. My inclination would be to postpone both until after Friday night.

“Now, Longjam and I are going to the roadside shop to hear the historical version of the Legend of the Curse of Chhinnomosta from an old sadhu. I think that this legend holds the key to everything. Let us plan a meeting about 4 pm.”

“Can you come to my office for tea?” asked the brigadier.

“We will be there.”

10. The Yogi's story

Jiyon took the steering wheel, for he figured Longjam wanted to talk about something. He was right. Longjam started: "About last night, I suppose we best talk it out?"

"We best."

"Well, did you also sense that those eyes were alive?"

"I did and they were."

"How do you establish that? The torchlight was on only for a couple of seconds. I did not see any movement of the pupils. Yet I had the distinct sense they were looking at us, like any live human eyes."

"The object was at the ground level. So even if the eyes are always open, the pupils would be adjusted for a horizontal gaze. We are both over six feet tall and we were standing only two feet from the object. What we saw was that the eyes were looking *up* at us. So the pupils had to move to a steeply upward gaze, even if we did not see that movement."

"I see."

"Longjam, you seem to be most deeply perturbed by this. Is there anything else?

"Boss Babu, did you sense a sad supplication in the eyes?"

"As if to say: 'Look what they have done to me!'?"

"Exactly."

"I did, Longjam."

"Boss Babu, what is the meaning of all this?"

"Let's hope the sadhu will tell us."

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In the car Dr. Reed said: "Clive, I have surgery in a bit. So if you don't mind I would like to put this whole business out of my mind. I will come a little before four so that we can have a private discussion."

“Of course, Jim. Don’t give it another thought. Let me then bring up something pleasant. There’s one thing I would like to request, seeing as how Mr. Jana will be leaving in a couple of days.”

“Name it.”

“About these special tribal artisans that make beautiful special order things for you. I have gathered that Mrs. Jana likes to collect authentic handcrafted tribal dolls from all over India.”

“Say no more.”

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The shaved-head but bearded sadhu was sitting at the edge of the veranda of the shop, his legs crossed and dangling. He was deeply engrossed in puffing on his coconut-bowl hukkah. As the two came near him, he opened his eyes and said: “Swagatam,” meaning Welcome! Apparently the shopkeeper had already filled him in. So Jiyon said: “Maharaj, may we offer you some tea?”

The man’s face lit up. Jiyon ordered tea and also some freshly made shingaras and amritis that were tantalizingly stacked up inside a glass case. The shopkeeper was happy and the sadhu was overjoyed. Jiyon and Longjam sat flat on the ground in front of the sadhu with tea glasses in hand, in that stance in which children sit before a storyteller. With a double serving of steaming tea and a plateful of goodies that he could only stare at all these days, the sadhu put everything into the storytelling.



The Legend of the Curse of Chhinnomosta

The very image of Chhinnomosta, the severed-head goddess, strikes fear in most everyone’s mind. It is a nightmarish scene. And yet, when you know the background story, it becomes a most benevolent scene. The goddess Parvati, a form of Kali, once went to bathe in the river with her two attendants. After bathing she became immersed in some thoughts of her own and stayed thus for a long time. Her attendants became hungry but there was no food available there. The attendants repeatedly kept begging

her to give them food. But the goddess was too deep in her thoughts and she continued to ignore them. "We are awfully hungry, we can't stand it anymore," they said. "O Mother of the Entire Universe, please feed us," they pleaded. At length the goddess got up, severed her own head with her kharga and caught it in her left hand. Spurts of blood came out and went to the mouths of her attendants and also into her own mouth. Hunger was thus allayed.

The Chhinnomosta Temple here is at least 500 years old – as judged by a team of university researchers from Calcutta. It was once decorated with vivid color frescoes that one standing inside the temple would have seen surround him. These frescoes were a collection of stories – each story told pictorially through a series of frames. While the frescoes are all but gone, the stories have survived through oral tradition, but also have been modified or altered.

The story of the Curse of Chhinnomosta was directly above the main entry door. The curse attached to anyone who willfully defiled the temple. Once the curse was placed, the defiler was given a Kali kharga and asked to behead a young woman near and dear to him. He was then to bring the body to the temple for use by the Kapaliks in their Shava Sadhana. The head he was to keep, plant it in the ground and water it regularly, just like a tree sapling. This way the head would keep fresh, ready to be revived later.

On precisely the seventh night after the defiling occurred the defiler himself would be beheaded. But just before that he would have a strong compulsion to behead anyone near him.

The head and body of the woman would then be reunited and restored to life. Ma Kali would then enter her body and inhabit it.



11. Danob Manush

After the story ended they got up to leave. Jiyon took out a 20-rupee bill from his pocket – a huge amount of money – and offered it to the sadhu. Jiyon held the money in his two hands, indicating that he was making a votive offering to a holy man rather than giving alms to a poor man. The sadhu took it, looking visibly moved by this gesture. He beckoned the two to come nearer to him. When they did, he whispered: "Since you are such good people, I will tell you a secret only the three Kapaliks and I know. The Chhinnomosta in that temple is alive and awake. The curse is very real – do not doubt it for a moment. It is not necessary for any human being to execute the curse. It is self-executing. All that is necessary is that the defiler be told the story of the curse. After that, the thing takes a life of its own. All other elements somehow provide themselves."

"So the Kapaliks are not actively involved?"

"Not at all. The head Kapalik is a noble man of deep learning. He can quote you chapter and verse from the Sanskrit scriptures."

"About the powers of the head Kapalik, is this true?"

"True enough!"

"I see," replied Jiyon. "Maharaj, is there anything about a deer?"

"That is a different story altogether. The temple is guarded by a spirit animal which was shown in the frescoes in the form of a one-horned baby deer. Its single horn is a warning to everyone that it is no mortal creature and it is not to be harmed."

As they started to leave, Longjam suddenly turned and asked: "The defiler … does he remain his own self during this one week? I mean, does his nature change in any way?"

"Oh, did I not tell you? As soon as he has heard the story of the curse, he becomes a Danob Manush, a ghoul in human shape. He becomes enormously powerful and very wily. He will in fact appear to all to be his normal self."

Just as they were getting into the car Jiyon paused: "Longjam, we need to ask this shopkeeper about the movement of the colonel last Saturday. The shop overlooks the trailhead. So he must have seen at least the colonel's vehicle parked there. But if we

start asking questions about a British officer, he might think we are anarchists and clam up on us. You have any ideas?"



British India Motor Driving License

The shopkeeper was alone in the shop. Longjam took out an impressive looking identity card in its own pouch and asked: "Do you know what this is?" The shopkeeper shook his head: "Sorry, I cannot read." Longjam then told him: "Ji, we are actually from the military investigative service." As he spoke he slid the card halfway out from the pouch. Both the pouch and the card were elegantly cloth-bound and embossed with some writing in English. The shopkeeper looked enormously impressed at the sight of it and clearly took it to be a military ID of sorts. He said: "You two did seem to me to be important people! Now, what can I do for you?"

"Well, a big military officer, an Englishman, is missing. He came to hunt here last Saturday and has not been seen since. We are looking for him. He is a big, tall man. You may have seen him last Saturday."

"Why didn't you ask me this in the first place? I do have some information."

"Go on."

"When I opened my shop about 6 am Saturday, I saw the saheb pull up in his Jeep and go into the jungle. He came out about noontime and left."

"When he came back from the jungle, did you notice anything unusual about him?"

“Only that besides his gun, he was carrying a long package wrapped in his own khaki jacket.”

“Anything else?”

“Not that time.”

“There was another time?!”

“You see, my two sons and I take turns to sleep in the shop at night – what with all the thieves and robbers around. On Saturday night it was my elder son’s turn. He gathered his friends here and had a brisk game of Dash-Pachish going on the veranda until late hours of night. At around 1 o’clock the saheb came back. He took out a large hold-all from his Jeep and went into the jungle. It seemed heavy from the look of how he carried it. Then the boys dispersed. So we do not know when the saheb came back from the jungle.”

12. The machine shop project

When the brigadier asked everyone to come to tea, he had meant Devonshire Tea! For there, in a corner sitting area of his office furnished with sofas and a coffee table, was set out the spread: crumpets, cakes, butter, jam, clotted cream – the whole works. Jiyon remarked: “That is a most welcome sight, Brigadier, for my friend and I have not eaten since breakfast.”

“And you did not eat much then either,” replied the brigadier. “Let’s get started.”

After everyone was fortified a little, Brig. Barker asked his Duty Sergeant not to disturb him for the next hour and to close the door on the way out. He then looked at Jiyon as if to ask: Where do we begin?

Jiyon said: “Longjam, you are better at storytelling than I. Why don’t you fill these gentlemen in on the legend?”

Longjam faithfully reproduced the story they had just heard and the conversation that had followed after that. After he indicated with a slight nod that he had finished, Jiyon picked up the thread: “In the light of this I would recommend very strongly that you withdraw from keeping the colonel company the next two nights. Protect the perimeter of his house from any intruders, but don’t be present inside the house yourselves.”

The brigadier looked at the doctor who moved his head from side to side to say no. Brig. Barker now replied: “Mr. Jana, you have laid out a very strong case. We do not disbelieve that we are in danger. But we have to give Nigel the benefit of doubt and stand by him. There are considerations bigger than our own lives. Friendship, honor, England – such things.”

Jiyon poured himself a third cup of tea. He was himself not sure where to go from here. At last he made up his mind: “Let us then take one night at a time. Tonight, that object in the backyard needs to be positively identified by somebody who knew Mrs. Dorchester, and preferably by a compatriot of hers. Are you two up to it?”

When Jiyon received a grim nod from both, he continued: “On your way to the colonel’s bungalow, please swing by your office, Dr. Reed, and pick up a dosage of sleeping drug that you think is very strong but safe. Find a way to administer it to the colonel, preferably in his pre-dinner drink. If not, then in his glass of water at dinner.

No later. As soon as he is out of commission, go and do the identifying, but do not disturb anything. Then leave immediately. Put the colonel in his bed and let him sleep it off. Any problems with this plan?"

Both indicated there was none. Jiyon said: "Good. Now, do any of you know if there is a metal smith in Kohima that can fabricate something to order?"

A puzzled Brigadier replied: "Why, there is a very elaborate workshop right here in the garrison. They patch up all kinds of things, tanks, lorries,.. What is it that we need fabricated?"

As Jiyon described it, he saw the two sahebs' eyes go wide. Then the brigadier said: "Jim and I will walk over there and speak privately to the shop foreman. We will make up some story why we need these. Now, what about tomorrow's plans?"

Jiyon now revealed the next phase of his plan to the two increasingly surprised-looking sahebs: "At about 10 am tomorrow morning Longjam and I will show up at Col. Dorchester's doorstep. You will instruct your soldier posted there to let us through. We will tell the colonel we are SIS agents assigned to the Bengal Command. So he will know how we got past the guard. He also knows that in this war theater, SIS agents do not carry official identification. We will show him our driving licenses and tell him that the only person in Kohima that knows our identity is the garrison commander. He may believe us or he may call you. If he calls you, you will verify that we are with the Secret Intelligence Service. We will then make up some reasons why we are visiting the colonel. This is the only way we can assess the actual situation for ourselves and make plans to protect you accordingly. I need to be sure in my mind who or what Col. Dorchester is right at this moment. Are we agreed?"

"This is highly irregular …," said Brig. Barker uncertainly. Then, in barely a few seconds, he said firmly: "Agreed."

"Good. Tomorrow night will be the fateful night, and we need some time to carefully go over our strategy. So lets us meet at 3 pm tomorrow."

"It is my turn," said the doctor. "Come to my quarters for tea. I will have to reschedule a meeting, but it is not a problem. My cook can make excellent Bengali sweets, especially something called patisapta."

"That happens to be a favorite with both of us," said Jiyon happily.

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The shop foreman was anxious to please the big boss. If he had any curiosity about the strange project, he did not express it. After he heard all the requirements, he considered the matter and then said: “It is no problem. I will have them ready by noon tomorrow. It will be a hinged contraption with a clasp fastener. I will take the measurements now. However, it will have to be at least a quarter inch thick and so a little heavy.”

“How heavy?”

The foreman did some calculation and told them. “I think we can handle that.” said the brigadier.

After the measurements were taken the two men walked towards the doctor’s car. He said to his friend: “Clive, the way things are unfolding, it is as though the events are running away from us. We have no control over things. We are simply going along.”

“I have the same feeling, and I have considered the matter. On the whole I get the feeling Mr. Jana is very much in control. Very few people can have the traumatic experiences these two have had and still think calmly and logically. Also, they are willingly committing themselves to life-threatening situations that they did not at all have to. We can do no better than follow their lead, at this stage. Now, Jim, are you sure about standing by Nigel, given all that we have heard?”

“Absolutely.”

“And are you up to what we have to view this evening?”

“Clive, you are forgetting that I am a surgeon.”

13. A close call

Nigel greeted them with a sad smile. They sat in the sitting room while the driver brought in the dinner basket from the car. “What have you chaps brought this evening?” asked Nigel.

“I believe it is curried mutton and Basmati pilaf,” answered Brig. Barker.

Suddenly the driver came out of the Dining Room, looking completely confused. He looked at the brigadier and said: “Beg pardon, Sir, but there is no dining table. The room is completely empty, Sir!”

The two visitors instantly got up and headed for the Dining Room. Nigel followed them as he offered the explanation: “See, chaps, I was feeling absolutely claustrophobic here. You are the ones that asked me to stay indoors. So I dismantled and removed the dining table and the chairs and the cupboards. This has created a large empty space I can sit in or walk around in. Without this I was going out of my mind. We will eat in the Sitting Room today, from the coffee table.”

Indeed, except for the kharga standing in one corner, the Dining Room was completely empty and looking very spacious. One could run here in circles. “Fair enough,” said Brig. Barker. Then he looked at his driver and said: “Lay out the dinner on the coffee table, please.”

They knew that Nigel was very fond of phooluri and tamarind chutney. That was what was for appetizer this evening. It was served quite showily in individual plates: a thimble of chutney in the middle and the round fritters arranged around it. The chutney was what the good doctor had doctored, quite heavily. Nigel dug into his plate and within minutes, was snoring on the sofa. They waited a few minutes and then poked him. Nothing. Now the two stalwart men, with great difficulty, dragged Nigel to his bed and laid him out there. They found the keys in his pocket, unlocked the door to the garden and stepped out.

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Shortly after 10 am the next morning Brig. Barker, looking not quite himself, took a call. The caller apologized profusely for going to sleep on them the previous night, adding: “Strangest thing! I don’t know what happened.” Then he came to the purpose of the call. The brigadier listened to the caller and said: “Yes, they are SIS agents.

Their names are Jana and Shantikumar. They are both quite tall and athletic looking. Shantikumar is a Manipuri and has a Chinese-like face. Make sure the address in their driving license is Khulna. And by the way, Nigel, this is in strictest confidence. The identities of these men are not to be revealed to anyone."

At about 11:30 am his Duty Sergeant popped in and said: "Sir, the machine shop foreman is here. He says you sent for him."

"Yes, please show him in and then close the door behind you. Do not disturb us until we are finished."

The foreman entered, carrying a large cardboard box. When he showed his handiwork, the brigadier was amazed to see what a professional job this was. The hinges moved smoothly, the clasp closed securely, and it was not that heavy at all. Its edges were flared so as to cause no discomfort. The brigadier tried his on and felt most at ease. All his apprehension about the contraption was gone. He thanked the foreman and dismissed him. He felt he should remove the doctor's apprehension also and called him to tell him about the contraption.

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After Col. Dorchester was satisfied with the identity, they sat down around the Coffee Table. Jiyon said: "Colonel, we are here to assess the security surrounding the Imphal-Kohima Road of which you are in charge. Fort William thinks that all eyes are focused on the Ledo Road because of the big American General and the media hoopla surrounding him, and the Imphal-Kohima Road is being neglected. This is where the Japanese would push through, they think. So we would like to start with interviewing you and would like to start with the security arrangements in your home. Your native staff, for example. What can you tell us about them?"

"I have about a dozen people working here, cooks, gardeners, drivers, guards and so on. The ethnicities are Naga, Bengali and Assamese. They have all been vetted."

"Can we speak to some of them?"

"I am afraid that is not possible. I have given them the week off."

"Every single one of them?!"

"Yes. My wife is away and so I thought this is good time to give them time off."

“Your wife is away? We hoped to talk to her as well. And time is of the essence. Well … how do we handle this … where exactly is she?”

“She is in Dibrugarh, visiting friends.”

“Good! We have people in Dibrugarh. Please give us her address and we will send a message for someone to interview her right away.”

“I am afraid I don’t know which friends she is staying with.”

Longjam took over. He said in a firm, even rude voice: “Colonel, this is not sounding good. If you do not know where your wife is, it is a matter of great and immediate concern for us. For all we know she may have been kidnapped by bad people who can force you to do things for them. This place is teeming with Japanese agents.”

The colonel looked very fidgety. He now said: “Chaps, don’t get so riled up. Let me think a little to see if I can remember what she said about where she was going to stay.” Then he added with a smile: “All you hush-hush boys are doing a fine job. I suppose those heavy leather jackets are to hide weapons?”

“We never carry weapons, Colonel,” said Jiyon as he opened the flaps of his jacket to give the colonel a look. The colonel said: “Have you chaps had breakfast? What hotel are you staying in?”

“We have had breakfast, thank you. We have not checked into a hotel yet. We will after we leave here,” replied Jiyon.

“So nobody besides Brig. Barker knows you are here?”

“That’s right. Now let’s get back to *our* asking the questions.”

“Sorry, chaps. I am just so curious about how you boys operate. Excuse me one second. Nature calls. I will be right back and answer all your questions.”

The colonel got up and went into the Dining Room. Jiyon sprang up, pushed Longjam and whispered: “Run, Longjam run.” In a split second they were out of the front door and running towards the frontage road.

Now they looked back. They had left the front door wide open. Inside the door was standing the giant figure of the colonel, the huge crescent moon-shaped broad sword shining in his hand. He did indeed looked like Danob Manush now.

14. Tea at Dr. Reed's

"Boss Babu, this is where we say: 'That was close!' "

"Closer than you think, Longjam. He would have cut one of us in two halves in an instant, for sure. The other would come to the defense and would probably lose a limb and then the head. The colonel figured if we got out of that house, we would return with reinforcement and that would spoil his entire plan for this fateful evening. He verified that Brig. Barker was the only one who knew about us, and he knows that the brigadier would die tonight. So he felt safe in dispatching us. He would probably have stashed the pieces in the garden."

"How did you figure this is what he would do?"

"First, he said he had to answer a nature's call. But he did not go towards the bathroom which is reached through his bedroom. Instead he went to the Dining Room where we know the kharga is kept. Plus all the questions he was asking and his general demeanor."

"This is sure to convince the two sahebs not to go through with their visit tonight."

"I am not at all sure Longjam. I do not think fear will dissuade them. Remember what they said about honor and England and such things? They really mean it."

"Yes, that made an impression on me as well. Boss Babu, this is all too intense. What say you we go to the town, have a coffee, browse a little and then have a nice lunch there?"

In answer Jiyon made a U-turn and headed towards the town.

A little later Longjam asked: "Boss Babu, were you actually baiting the colonel to do what he did?!"

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Doctor Reed's Bengali cook laid out an authentic Bengali tea service: patisapta, nimki, chanachoor and sandesh. Jiyon took one look and said: "Let's postpone our dark business for a while and enjoy this." He bit into a patisapta, the semi-sweet crepe with an intensely sweet paste in the middle, made of milk boiled down to a solid paste and mixed with puréed coconut and sugar. As one ate, he first tasted the slightly chewy crepe, then the soft paste. It was a heavenly combination of textures

and tastes that came in just the right sequence, until everything melted in the mouth. When the cook came to pour tea, Jiyon and Longjam complimented him profusely in Bengali. He looked greatly pleased.

However, business could not be postponed long. First the two sahebs gave an account of the previous evening. They confirmed the identity of the object in the garden patch: There was no doubt. The sahebs then asked Jiyon what he thought about the emptying of the Dining Room. Jiyon gave a very direct reply: "That is the combat arena. He is a large man himself and he needs a large clear area to swing that long kharga effectively. He wants heads to fly."

Then it was the sahebs' turn to hear what happened this morning. Jiyon concluded the account by saying: "I hope that in the light of this, you gentlemen will drop your plan and let whatever is to happen to the colonel happen. You can double the guards to prevent any outsiders from harming him. If you want to feel usefully involved, you yourselves can also take up guard duty. But there really is no need for you to be inside that house."

The brigadier said: "Excuse us for a minute as we confer among ourselves." Jiyon and Longjam started to leave to wait in the veranda outside, but Dr. Reed said: "Stay here please. We will speak in French among us if you don't mind." Jiyon started to say something, but Dr. Reed had already turned to Brig. Barker and started to speak: "Parlons en Français. …"

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Presently the brigadier looked at Jiyon: "We will go stay with Nigel in the house until after midnight. So please tell us what the plan of action is."

"So be it. First, Brigadier, the colonel is used to seeing you wearing a holster. So you will do the same this evening. But change that revolver for a large caliber one. Do not have any compunction when it comes to using the weapon – our visit to the colonel's house this morning has removed any doubts in this regard. If you see the colonel start to swing the kharga, shoot him in the head. If you shoot him anywhere else, it will not stop him in time. He will finish his swing. Dr. Reed, you will not have any weapon. Take a syringe full of some heavy sedative that you can administer instantly. Put it in a hard syringe case and place it in your pocket. Look for an opportunity to administer it anytime during the evening. If midnight passes while the colonel remains sedated, that would be the best course.

“Longjam and I will be lurking outside the back door and the front door. Please instruct your guards accordingly and tell them to give us two rifles. It is important that one of you try to surreptitiously unlock one or both of those doors from inside, without the colonel noticing. If we have to break in after some alarm is raised, we may not be inside in time to help you.

“Each of you will carry a whistle and upon the first sign of trouble, you will blow the whistle. Please instruct your guards not to use their whistles at all tonight, no matter what.

“And here is the most important part. Have your driver lay out the dinner in the Sitting Room. The colonel will be suspicious about the meal. So make sure that all the dishes are communal. Arrive there quite late. Make some excuses. Make the dinner quite elaborate to stretch out as much as possible. The colonel will attempt to lure you into the Dining Room. Sooner or later, you will have to go. But push it towards midnight as much as possible.

“Finally, do not count on us being able to come to your rescue. Your best defense is the contraption and your best help is the other person. I am sorry, but this is the best plan I can come up with. The second plan is of course for you to back out. And there is a third plan: If you wish to confront him openly, we can come in with you. The four of us can overpower him and keep him incapacitated and under watch until the midnight hour passes.”

Jiyon finished. There fell a long silence. It was as though everyone was absorbing the plan and executing it in his own mind. The brigadier spoke: “We will go with your original plan, hoping that this is the best chance for Nigel to survive this night and become his normal self. Just one question. What is a Danob Manush?”

“A Danob is an evil creature that takes the shape of some living thing. The most famous example is of course the buffalo-headed human that the goddess Durga is depicted as slaying. A Danob Manush is a Danob who takes the human – the Manush – form. I do not believe you will see the colonel change his human appearance before you. But expect him to display nearly inhuman strength and prowess as he wields that gigantic kharga.”

“Sweet Mother of Jesus!” said the doctor as he crossed himself.

15. Prelude to terror

As they drove back to the Dak Bungalow, Logjam asked: “Boss Babu, what were they saying in French, if it was not something personal?”

“No, nothing personal. Basically, they were saying that to abandon a friend who has fallen in a situation that he cannot control is cowardice. It is not ‘British.’ Perhaps, if tonight passes without events, Nigel would be his own self again. They owed it to him, to Sylvie and to England to stand by him in this faraway land.”

“I see. And what is your assessment of the situation we will face tonight.”

“I think we have to allow for the worst. The colonel will lock them in. We will not be able to get in through any of the doors when we hear the whistle or other sounds of trouble. That means that we will not be in any position to help. And that troubles me.”

Longjam replied: “From the sketch of the house I saw the Dining Room has windows facing the back of the house. Now, as we saw the house from the front, the windows have wood slat-type shutters. There may in addition be a glass pane inside. So with one strike of the rifle butt we can make a big hole in the window. We will not be able to get in and we may not have a good line of fire, but we can create some commotion to give the sahebs some time.”

“Longjam, that’s brilliant! I just got an idea. What a commotion we can create!”

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At about 7 pm Brig. Barker called the colonel: “Nigel, old boy, I am afraid there has been a bad lorry accident up on the Kohima Ridge. One of my officers is being taken to the hospital in critical condition and Jim will be operating on him directly he arrives. I am standing by. But we hope to arrive at your place about 9:30 pm. Sorry, chap, but this is something I must attend to.”

Nigel did not sound too happy about it, but seemed to understand. In actuality the two sahebs arrived at nearly 10 pm. As soon as Nigel saw them, he asked: “Why are you two chaps wearing these heavy wool scarves around your necks? Surely it is not *that* cold!”

“Well, we were standing out in the open on the Ridge for quite a while and we both felt we were coming down with something,” replied Dr. Reed.

The driver laid out a multi-course dinner on the coffee table in the Sitting Room. Nigel remarked: “Isn’t it a bit late for such an elaborate meal?”

“Let’s eat what we can,” said Dr. Reed and got started himself on the appetizers. Nigel went about the house, getting glasses and the accouterments for the drinks. The tension resulted from the disruption of the routine soon melted away and the usual joviality set in.

When the large wall clock in the Dining Room struck 11 pm, spacing out the eleven singsong notes, Nigel suggested that they go into the Dining Room and stand around a bit – stretch the legs while enjoying the after-dinner brandy and cigar. Dr. Reed held him at bay, as he still had food on his plate.

Brigadier Barker now stood up and said: “Nigel, I need to use your bathroom, please.” He walked through the bedroom and into the bathroom. As soon as he was inside, he took the roll of toilet paper and hid it behind a cupboard. He then called out: “Nigel, there is no toilet paper!”

Directly Nigel went to help the brigadier, the doctor ran to the front door. It had been padlocked from the inside. Same with the back door. Nigel must have locked these doors when they thought he was getting the drinks. Now the doctor began to be worried and for the first time, a little afraid. He checked his pockets to see that the whistle was there in his left pocket and the syringe case in his right. He now steeled himself to be ready to blow the whistle no matter what, although he realized that ‘help’ the whistle would bring had now been locked out.

When the brigadier came out, it was about 11:45 pm. Without letting him sit down again Nigel handed him a large brandy snifter. Then the doctor got the same. Nigel did not take one himself. The brigadier and the doctor declined cigars, for that would tie up their left hands as well. They now realized they had made their first strategic blunder. Their right hands were tied up with the snifters. The doctor’s syringe was in the right pocket of his trousers, and the Brigadier’s side-arm was on the right side of his waist.

Nigel now put his huge arm around the brigadier’s shoulder as if in affection, and steered him to the Dining Room. The doctor followed. He considered jabbing Nigel with the needle, but there was not enough time before they got into the Dining Room.

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At about 11:45 pm Longjam checked the front door. It did not open. As previously arranged he moved towards the back, climbed the mango tree and silently dropped into the garden. Jiyon was standing on the back veranda, next to the Dining Room window. Longjam nodded his head from side to side to indicate that the front door did not open. Jiyon now signaled to indicate the same for the back door. He whispered in Longjam's ear: "Stand ready to blow a large hole in the window with your rifle butt. Do it if you hear the whistle or gunfire or on signal from me, whichever comes first. I will now get ready to do my part."

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Outside everything was quiet. The guards continued their routine vigil. But this night they were particularly watchful of the forest's edge. They were nearly certain whatever was coming had to be coming from there. If the intruder was a human, they were to challenge him and to detain him. If it was an animal, they were to scare it away. In either case if these techniques did not work, they were to open fire. If it was something other than human or animal, they were to shine torchlight upon it and scream at the top of their voice.

16. The curse unfolds

As they entered the vast, empty Dining Room, Nigel closed the door behind them, the door to the Sitting Room. He put a padlock on it, locked it and put the bunch of keys back in his pocket. Both the Dining Room doors were now padlocked from the inside. There was no way out.

Colonel Nigel Dorchester proceeded to that corner of the Dining Room which was closest to the back door and which had the kharga standing against it. He turned full face on the two guests who were standing in about the middle of the room. They saw that Nigel's countenance had changed dramatically. His face was hard, his eyes bloodshot, his nostrils flared and his teeth gnashing. He made a hissing sound as he spoke: "I am not your friend Nigel that you know. I am somebody else. At the stroke of the midnight hour, which will be very soon, they will get me. Before they do, it is my lot to make heads fly and blood spurt. That is why you are here." So saying, he picked up the kharga in his right hand. It looked extraordinarily large and sharp and heavy and shiny.

There was something of a hypnotic, almost soporific, quality to that little speech. The two visitors stood motionless as if incapacitated by the spit of some giant predator before it would devour them. The whistle was forgotten. Nigel took two steps forward and started the backward swing of the kharga in a powerful two-handed grip, preparatory to the strike. The brigadier at last accepted the danger of his situation and suddenly released the brandy glass so that it fell straight to the floor and shattered. But before he could unbutton his holster, the blade moved with tremendous speed and power. It caught the brigadier squarely in the neck. There was a deafening sound of metal striking metal. The brigadier's quarter inch-thick neck armor had stopped his head from flying. But the force of the impact sent him reeling, until he hit the wall and collapsed to the floor. His revolver remained in the holster, still buttoned.

Nigel was greatly surprised and angered by the neck armor. For a split second he remained confused. The loud metallic clang served as the necessary signal and there followed an even louder thud. To his further surprise Nigel saw a large hole, about a foot in diameter, busted open in the back window. Through it peered one of the SIS agents from the morning. But Nigel completely ignored this development and moved his kharga back again – this time to run it through the doctor's midriff. The doctor stood petrified, the brandy snifter still in hand.

Just as he was beginning his forward swing, some movement near the busted window caught Nigel's eyes. And then his face took on an aspect of abject horror. His kharga dropped from his hand and he himself collapsed on the floor. There was a hand that came through the hole in the window and from it was dangling, by the luxuriant blond hair, a severed head. The face was fresh. Its eyes were alive and moving. They were smiling sadly, looking directly at Nigel. A smile started from the eyes and started to spread. In about two seconds, it reached the corners of the mouth. The beauty spot twitched slightly.

Full five seconds now passed. The doctor stood where he stood. The colonel lay where he lay. Jiyon's right hand kept dangling the object. And then the first chime of midnight hour rang out.

Longjam now kept his eyes peeled on the back wall over which any outside assassins would have to come from. But as if suddenly electrified by the chime, Nigel sprang up and picked up the kharga. Now at last the doctor sprang to action. He too dropped the glass of brandy and dived towards where the brigadier lay. He unbuttoned the brigadier's holster, took out the revolver and pointed it towards Nigel's head. But now a strange scene was unfolding. Nigel did not advance on them again. He stood where he stood and started to swing the kharga over his head. Round and round it went as the clock chimed on. By the eighth note, the kharga was just a shiny blur. By the tenth note it was making a loud whirring noise like a ceiling fan. Now the level of the horizontal circle in which the kharga moved way over Nigel's head came down slowly. On the twelfth note, upon an odd twist of the wrist, the kharga sliced through Nigel's own head. As it started to topple, he caught it in is left hand, by the hair. So there he was standing, headless, with the bloody kharga in one hand and his head dangling by the hair from the other. Blood spurted out from the neck.

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In the Dining Room were gathered now four live humans, one corpse in two pieces and a piece of another corpse. Longjam went into the Sitting Room, found the bottle of brandy and two fresh glasses and served the same to the two sahebs. As they eagerly gulped down the restorative, Longjam helped them remove their neck armors. The brigadier's armor had been nearly cut through by the kharga. Had the armor been any less than a quarter inch thick, the kharga might have cut clear through it. The brigadier's neck was bruised but was otherwise intact.

Nigel's head had fallen facing this way. Strangely, in death, he looked to the brigadier and the doctor like his old self, the lovable friend they knew up until a week ago. He now looked helpless and lost.

As the two sahebs sat on the floor with their backs to the wall Jiyon addressed them, standing in the middle of the room: "Gentlemen, we have a great deal to do and very little time to do it in. So please bring yourselves to full attention and listen to me carefully. First, we have a choice now to call the police in or to cover this thing up completely. Consider the implications of presenting to the police what we have lying here on the floor, plus an explanation consisting of a bunch of completely unbelievable cock-and-bull stories. Consider how this will play in the media here and in England, and what unrest this may create among the citizenry in both countries."

The sahebs thought deeply but responded quickly. The brigadier said: "Please tell us what the cover-up plan is."

"All right. It is clear that the guards outside have not heard anything of the commotion here. First, three of us will get busy with buckets and burlap and clean up this place. Dr. Reed will go to his office and bring whatever instruments he needs to sew the head back on and dress the corpse, cravat and all, to look perfectly normal. Dr. Reed will then issue a certificate of natural death. Tomorrow morning you will summon the colonel's friends and colleagues and reveal his death. You will also reveal that the colonel and his wife recently had a marital spat and she went away in a huff without telling anyone where she was going. This is why the colonel gave his household staff a week off, thus saving himself the embarrassment of them finding out. The colonel hoped that in one week his wife would have calmed down and contacted him. This is why you two were keeping him company evenings. You will tell all gathered that under the circumstances, an immediate burial is the best course. You will then take the body to the church.

"Longjam and I will transport the other article to the Temple of Chhinnomosta and leave it there. It will thus be reunited with its complementary part. We hope that the Kapaliks will administer some type of last rite. As I have explained, the Kapaliks are not bad people. We can count on them to do the right thing. I already have your torch in my car and we will take the two rifles also. Who can tell what awaits there at this hour of night."

The sahebs listened with full attention. Then they looked at each other and seemed to come to a silent agreement. Dr. Reed said: “Mr. Jana, we will do our part. But are you sure you want to go to that terrifying place at this hour?”

“I feel as though I have to. I feel as if something or someone is impelling me to do this. Longjam and I have become instruments of this curse, like the rest of you. Gentlemen, let’s get together for a farewell dinner at the Dak Bungalow tomorrow night, about 8 pm, say. Actually, now that it is after midnight, it would be tonight. Then we can have our final wrap-up session. As you know, we are off the following morning.”

They started to leave but almost as an afterthought Jiyon picked up the kharga. “I think I will return this as well. It belongs in the hand of the goddess.”

“Mr. Jana, Mr. Shantikumar,” said the brigadier, “Had it not been for you two we would now be lying in several pieces on the floor.”

Jiyon gave a very slight nod to acknowledge the gratitude. Neither he nor Longjam knew how else to respond to that.

17. A return to the temple

Although it was a dark night, the trail – already familiar to them by now – was easy to follow. The use of the torch was kept to a minimum. They arrived at the temple and found it quiet and unattended. It was looking most sinister in the dark, with the banyan tree taking on the appearance of some monstrous living thing on guard duty. They approached the front porch of the temple. Presently they heard the sound of footsteps on dry leaves. They turned around and saw, standing under a tree not fifty feet from them, the three Kapaliks. Their dark complexion nearly blended with that of this night. The only reason they were visible was that their skins were shiny and their eyes were glowing like amber. The big one who had been sitting on the corpse that night stood in the middle. This was Kapalik Shavajagarak.

Longjam was carrying the kharga in his left hand, with its blade resting on his left shoulder. The rifle was in his right hand. He let the kharga drop to the ground. The fingers of his right hand tightened around the rifle stock as he slowly started to raise the muzzle with his left hand. Jiyon was holding the package, wrapped in bathroom towels, in his left hand. His right hand held the torch. His rifle was slung over his right shoulder. For the moment he was helpless.

The head Kapalik now pointed his index finger to the package and then to the porch. The meaning was clear: Put the package on the porch. As Jiyon moved to do this Longjam brought the rifle to the firing position, his finger on the trigger. The bolt had already been slid home. Jiyon slowly put down the torch on the ground. The Kapaliks were approximately to his left. As he slowly put down the package on the porch, his right hand, obscured from the Kapaliks, slid the rifle strap off his shoulder and grabbed the stock. Jiyon caught the muzzle of the rifle with his freed left hand and was now in a firing stance. They now had the advantage: Two guns against three men who appeared unarmed.

But the Kapaliks did not react at all to this threatening stance. The head Kapalik signaled Longjam to leave the kharga on the porch and the latter did. The Kapalik raised his right hand in a gesture of blessing and then pointed to the trail through which the visitors had come. Jiyon whispered to Longjam: “Let’s leave. But keep your weapon trained on them and we will back out of here.” He picked up the torch.

As they were well away from the temple and still backing away, they saw the three Kapaliks approach the package and bend down over it. They started to unwrap it. It was as though they had been waiting for it to arrive, with some plan for it in mind. Their backs were now towards Jiyon and Longjam. “All right, that is all we can do. Let’s go,” said Jiyon and turned and they started walking at a fast pace.

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In the evening, before the dinner guests arrived, Jiyon came to the desk of the Dak Bungalow and asked the clerk to prepare their bill. The clerk informed him: “There is no bill, Sir. An accounts officer from the garrison came and paid your bill in full – room, restaurant, laundry – everything. Even tonight’s dinner is paid for in advance.”

The guests arrived together promptly at eight. Dr. Reed was carrying a wood box about two feet long, a foot wide and six inches deep. The brigadier was carrying a soft package of sorts.

They presented the box to Jiyon, saying: “A little something for Mrs. Jana from us.”

The front of the box was open and covered with cellophane paper that showed the content to full advantage. It was an exquisite handcrafted doll depicting a Kachin tribal maiden in her finery: The vivid colors, the shining beads, the fabric work with the plush coiled cotton inlays – all most lifelike, only miniature. Jiyon could imagine the look on his wife’s face when she would see this and felt greatly elated himself on that thought. “But how did you know my wife collects dolls?!”

“We have our ways,” replied Brig. Barker.

Jiyon smiled: “I can assure you that this will be the crown jewel in her collection. This alone makes this whole trip worthwhile, from my point of view.”

“Mine as well,” added Longjam. “Bhabiji will be ecstatic.”

“I am glad,” said the Doctor. “This was made by a very special Burmese artisan who is my friend. He put his best effort into it. Please tell Mrs. Jana that an exact twin of this doll today is adorning the Viceroy’s residence in Delhi.”

Next they gave the soft package to Longjam who opened it to reveal a most spectacular hand-woven Naga robe. Dr. Reed said: “This is also made by a very special local artisan. Hope it will remind you of us.”

Longjam deployed the robe fully for everyone to see, saying: “This would be more appropriate for a king!”

As they sat around the dinner table the brigadier briefed them on the day’s activity. The funeral and the burial went without a hitch, amid great sadness. People completely understood about the marital spat and that saddened them even more.

The four now went through the elaborate dinner but no one had his mind on it. When Jiyon protested the hotel bill, Brig. Barker said: “Mr. Jana, no amount of money will match what you have done and we will not offend you by offering cash. Please let us do what little we can do on the side – for our own sake.”

Jiyon now asked: “Dr. Reed, how is Sher Bahadur faring?”

“He is fine. We have just released him. Our Army psychiatrist advised that he go talk to his priest about whatever he saw or thought he saw. The priest’s soothsaying and guidance should lead to his complete recovery from the trauma. While on that subject, Mr. Jana, what *did* Sher Bahadur see?”

Jiyon explained how the soldier climbed the mango tree and shone his torch on the head. He explained the difference between *Sher* and *Shir*. Sher Bahadur was not saying “Sher, Sher…horror, horror…”, but “Shir, shir… horror, horror…”, meaning “The head, the head … horror, horror…”

But Dr. Reed seemed uncertain: “But, Mr. Jana, from the mango tree he would have seen only the back of the head. All he would see is a silky white mound. He would not have seen the face and would not have known it was a severed head. Why would that sight put him in this state? Unless when he shone the torch, the head….”

“Exactly.”

“Sweet Mother of Jesus!”

Brigadier Barker now asked: “Mr. Jana, how did the …er… head remain so fresh for so many days?”

“The only explanation I can think of is that the coldness of the ground kept it from rotting and the regular watering kept it from dehydrating. But I am no expert on such issues. May be the colonel got some special chemicals from the Kapaliks to put in the water. But honestly, I don’t think there is a scientific explanation.”

“And I suppose that sighting of the unicorn by Sher Bahadur was the result of the power of suggestion?”

“Yes. There may have been a deer or a jackal approaching. But the single-horn bit was implanted in his mind by the colonel. We were meant to believe that the danger was coming from the forest.”

“I see! One more thing. I understood that Sylvie’s going to Dibrugarh was a matter of concern because she seemed to have left in an awful hurry. She was going to spend all day Saturday with her friends, and on early Sunday morning Nigel told us that she had left on a long train journey. Was there any other point that caused you to worry?”

Longjam replied: “Mrs. Dorchester came to Kohima to be by her husband in this war-torn place. Why would she agree to leave him in the lurch upon the sign of some trouble – a dubious one at that?”

As they were about to leave the brigadier said: “I am sorry, Mr. Jana, but the train was completely booked up – as you said. We could not get reservations for you in the First Class. There was only one seat available in the First Class for tomorrow’s train and that would of course not do for us. But we found a little space for you elsewhere in the same train which we hope will not be uncomfortable. A soldier will drive you to Dimapur tomorrow morning and explain the arrangements.”

The goodbyes were sad. In the short space of a couple of days, two Indians and two Englishmen had faced together a great deal. In the end two very fine people were gone. There was nothing they could do to help them. But also, two lives were saved.

“Mr. Jana, I know the PWD has said this about the civilian work, but for me, if you wish any military contracts here you have but to ask,” was the brigadier’s parting remark.

Jiyon and Longjam stood still as they saw the car disappear round the corner.

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The two Englishmen sat pensively in the car, reflecting on the momentous incidents of the last few days. Then Brig. Barker spoke, half to his friend and half as a soliloquy: “Two very fine men there.”

The doctor took up that chain of thought: “I was just thinking about the lines from Kipling:

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,…"

The brigadier took over:

"When two strong men stand face to face,
tho' they come from the ends of the earth!"

18. Goddess

The relatively short drive brought them to the Dimapur Railway Station. The train had already arrived from the north and was spewing steam in a restful manner. There was still a little time left before it would build a full head of steam and start to move powerfully on its way. The soldier who drove them picked up their two suitcases and asked them to follow him. To their surprise, he kept going towards the very back of the train. And then they understood. There had been attached to the back of the train a special coach colored brilliantly and emblazoned with the British Royal Crown in gold color. This was the type of saloon the high ranking officers – Generals, Viceroys and such – of the British-India Government used when they traveled. It was a complete home, with sitting room, bedrooms, toilets, a well-stocked kitchen and a bar and a full time attendant to see to every need and every whim of the guests. It simply got hitched to the regularly scheduled train, and the dignitaries traveled in great style and comfort. As they sank into the plush sofas and the attendant came and took the order for tea and refreshments, Jiyon said: “Longjam, this is the Achhi Zindagi, the good life.”

“I could get used to this,” said Longjam as he smiled broadly. “Boss Babu, there’s still fifteen minutes before we leave. I will go to the Wheeler’s Bookstand and see if they have any new mysteries out.”

Jiyon sipped his tea amid a mixture of strong emotions: sadness, relief, joy, pleasure. The events that were behind them he would take a long time to assimilate. But one thing was becoming clear. Everything about this business could be explained without the aid of the supernatural. All that the colonel did could be understood as the work of a deranged mind, a mind that went out of whack after hearing the story of the curse. There was a legend and there was a curse. But their power was only suggestive. Once the story was implanted, psychology took over.

Barely a minute after he left Longjam returned, or rather, staggered in. His face was ashen. He collapsed on the sofa. Jiyon quickly felt his pulse and called for the attendant. The latter took one look at the situation and quickly produced a cold, moist towel. As Jiyon was wiping Longjam’s face and neck with the towel, the attendant returned with a glass of milk laced with two teaspoonfuls of brandy. Longjam gulped this down and quickly felt revived. But his eyes still had a wild look. He remained

silent for a further few minutes and Jiyon did not press him. Finally, Longjam spoke haltingly.

"Boss Babu, I was walking up the platform. My face was not two feet from the windows of the train. When I came level with the First Class compartment I saw at the window a familiar face, clearly in this broad daylight. The face was most pleasant and vivacious and also nicely done up – and indeed looking like the face of a Greek sculpture. Not a hair out of place. And the beauty spot showed to great advantage."

Jiyon remained silent, for he sensed that there was more to this story. As shocking as the sight must have been, Longjam was not one to fall apart this badly over this. Sure enough, Longjam continued: "This is the compartment that connects to the Bengal line, and so the passenger may be going to Calcutta and on to Home. But here is the thing. She looked straight into my eyes and smiled. That smile traveled from the corners of her eyes down her face and reached the corners of her mouth. The beauty spot twitched a little. Then those large pale blue eyes distinctly spoke to me: "Nice to see you *again*!"

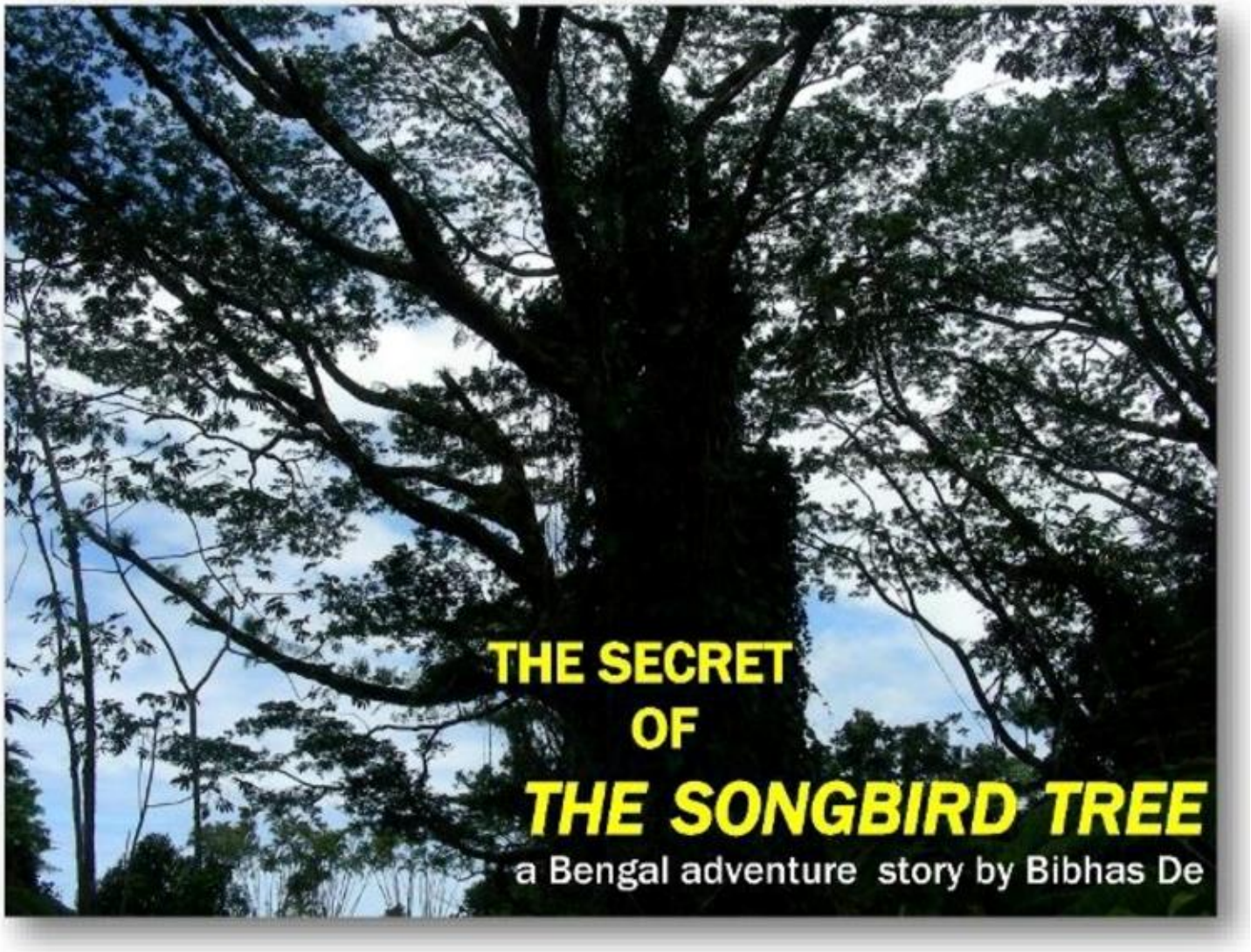
Longjam paused briefly and said: "Boss Babu, if you don't mind, I will have a lie-down." So saying, he stretched out on the sofa and closed his eyes.

The train had just started to move. Jiyon looked out the window on the usual flurry of activities that took place when a train pulled out. All those who came to see the passengers off were now filing out of the station through a single narrow gate at the end of the platform. There, in that queue, Jiyon now saw three familiar figures. This time they had made themselves presentable to the public. They were wearing freshly laundered knee-length dhotis and fotuahs. The big man in the middle saw Jiyon and waved to him. Then, with the index finger of the same hand, he pointed to the front of the train. He then joined his palms and raised them to the level of his forehead. Jiyon understood the clear message.

Up ahead in the train was riding with them a living goddess.



Sanchari De


THE SECRET
OF
THE SONGBIRD TREE
a Bengal adventure story by Bibhas De

কাকলিতরুর রহস্য

I. An urgent village meeting

An urgent meeting was called that morning by the village headman, the Morol, in the schoolhouse in the central oval. At least one member from each of the thirty-four families attended. On the teacher's raised wooden platform in a classroom were placed three chairs facing 'the class', the attending villagers. There on the dais sat the Morol, the priest and a representative of the District Government who had bicycled over from Srimangal.

The Morol cleared his throat and started the meeting: "Yesterday our small village suffered the fourth casualty since this horror of horrors started three months ago; and this time it was a two-month old baby girl, Baby Basu. I cannot overstate the danger to the village and the urgency to attend to this matter without delay. But it is also true that we are all at our wit's end as to how to deal with this whatever-it-is.

"Now, as you all know, Priest Rudra has concluded that this is the work of some very potent supernatural evil, and a Whole-Forest Exorcism is called for. He also feels that this entails a great danger for his person, including very possibly loss of life. This is why he has asked that each family pay him one thousand rupees for his services. I know that this is a great hardship and we will have to break into our life savings and sell some family jewels and perhaps also some livestock, but what choice do we have? And remember that the District Government has agreed to match the funds the villagers raise. And the fifteen families in the other village have also agreed to participate fully even though they have not been affected by the horror thus far. So your share of the net fees of one lac rupees Priest Rudra has asked for is considerably smaller than it would have been otherwise."

He stopped and looked at the priest. The latter took this as an invitation to speak. He began: "I consider myself as one of you villagers, and it pains me to ask for this kind of money. But I have to weigh this against the risk I am taking – which risk must be all too obvious to you. The police Sub-Inspector Chaudhury and Oldman Osman died very mysterious deaths. The boy Rupak went totally mad. And now a baby is missing. There is a good chance that if I go up against this evil, I will die too. In that case I would like to make sure that my family is financially set for life. You will give them the money. If I succeed, you will give me the money and it will have been well worth the cost. But if I fail and live, you will not pay me anything.

"So there, I have spoken frankly. Of course you are free to not use my services. You could probably shop around with other Ojhas in nearby villages and ask them what they would charge for a Whole Forest Exorcism. So I am making available to you an option but I am not pressing you to accept."

"OK," picked up the Morol, "I will now report to you that I have already spoken to three Ojhas who perform exorcisms in Srimangal, Sylhet and Bithangal. None of them has ever heard of Whole Forest Exorcism, let alone performed it. They think this must be a very specialized and rare ritual. So there is no option here of using other Ojhas. However, we will now hear from Ranjit Babu from the District Commissioner’s office. He has a suggestion to offer."

The District official reported that indeed the DC, a very benevolent British sahib, having been apprised of the situation, had agreed to match the funds the villagers would raise. But the invoice for payment must not mention exorcism. It should rather say Fees for Forest Restoration Services. The official then proceeded to brief the villagers on the progress the police investigators have made to date.

"Following the death of the Sub-Inspector about three months ago the police had immediately started their investigation. At that time, and also yesterday after the baby went missing, they scoured the forest in ever widening perimeters. But to no avail. The scent dogs they brought in yesterday were also no use. They seemed to have become spooked themselves. So the police are at their wit's end as well. However, they never really dropped the ball all this time. As they were making enquiries all around about what further to do, they came upon one lucky bit of information. The famed jungle adventurer Jiyon Jana of Khulna is currently in nearby Sylhet, on a job to construct a series of viaducts. The DC's office might be able to persuade him to come and have a look at the situation."

When the official paused one villager asked: "I don't understand this. What can an adventurer do for us in this situation? How much will he charge us? And how would Priest Rudra feel about this?"

The first two questions the official answered: "Mr. Jana and his colleague, a Manipuri gentleman named Longjam Shantikumar, an ex-Sergeant of the Army, are known to be seasoned outdoorsmen. They are well-versed on the ways of the

wilderness. So they might be able to see some key point or issue here that the police have missed. Also they might well survive such a phantasmagoric sight in the forest as caused young Rupak to lose his mind. And Mr. Jana is a well-to-do man. He would not dream of charging you anything."

Priest Rudra took over. "I have absolutely no objection to this. In fact I think we should invite these gentlemen and work with them. The only thing is, today is Monday. I must perform my ceremonies on a new moon which is next Sunday. If not, the ceremony will have to wait another month."

"We have a dire emergency. Waiting is out of the question," said the Morol.

"Well, if Mr. Jana agrees, we can bring him here almost immediately," said the official. "Then he will have until Saturday to look into this."

"Good," said the Morol. " Let's see a show of hands. Who wants to see these two gentlemen approached?"

All hands went up. The Morol and Priest Rudra also raised their hands.

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It was a Monday in August of 1946 with the skies over East Bengal a sparkling blue. Near one pm Jiyon Jana and his longtime associate Longjam Shantikumar were poring over some construction maps and charts at the job site in the outskirts of Sylhet, by the river Surma. They were sitting around a makeshift work table under a makeshift canvas tent. Presently they saw a police jeep pull up at the site. From the passenger’s seat got off a man wearing a khaki officer's uniform. He walked towards them and saluted, asking: "Mr. Jiyon Jana?"

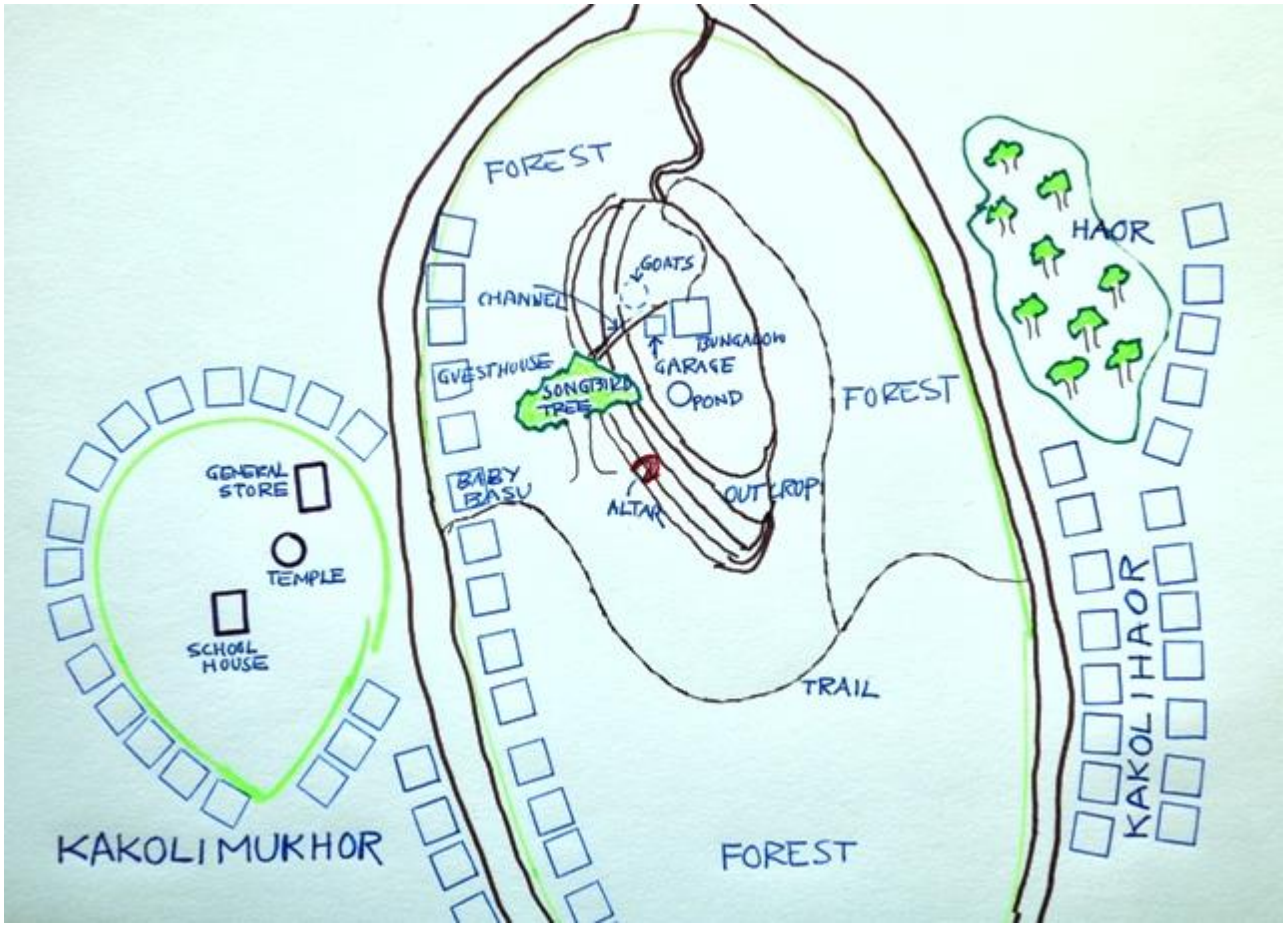
Jiyon nodded. The man said: "I am Inspector Shahryar Ferdous, Srimangal Police. I have been sent by the Commissioner of Sylhet District to beg your help on a matter of grave urgency and grave danger. Can you spare a little time so I can describe the matter briefly to you?"

Jiyon introduced Longjam to the Inspector. Longjam beckoned to a worker and asked him to bring them a round of tea and also to offer a cup to the driver of the jeep. The three men now sat down around the table. Jiyon said: "Take your time and give us as much detail as possible. Do not worry about being long-winded."

II. Inspector Ferdous narrates

The tiny village of Kakolimukhor lies in a hilly area in the tea plantation country outside Srimangal. It is a tiny sleepy village of some thirty families. It sits compactly at the foot of a hill which is densely forested over. You may even call this forest a jungle. Form this village if you cross the hill eastward, you come to an even smaller village called Kakolihaor.

Kakolimukhor of course means a place filled with bird song, and Kakolihaor means the marshland of bird song. The villages take their names from the fact that the canopy of that intervening forest is teeming with songbirds. In this forest, one particular spreading tree stands commanding over the village of Kakolimukhor.



This tree has come to be known as Kakolitoru or the Songbird Tree. It truly sets the tone and tenor of the daily life there. Every morning all morning the birds in the canopy sing and chirp and frolic. The sheer variety of bird species there is a wonder in itself: Koels, doels, bulbulis, tuntunis, moutusis, maachrangas, bou-katha-kaos …

an unusually rich collection. As the morning grows the birds fly away to the haor on the other side of the forest so that there are hardly any birds at all in the Songbird Tree at noontime. All day long they feed on the fish and the insects in the haor. Evening sees them all back safely to the nests. This cycle is so much a part of the life of the village that any disruption in it would be most noticeable and disconcerting to the villagers. A bad omen even.

Now, the forest covering the hill is nearly pristine except for the ruined bungalow at the top of the hill. It commands majestic views all around. This is a British tea planter's bungalow that has sat empty for some fifty years. It has gone to seeds and is considered today a haunted house. The villages actually have stories about the malevolent haunting here.

Some four months ago there came to the village of Kakolimukhor a stranger who asked to see the village headman. He introduced himself to the Morol as a priest who had fled from Burma to seek refuge in East Bengal. He has a Burmese wife and a daughter three years old, and not much money. He wondered if his family could settle down in the abandoned bungalow on the hilltop for free. In return, he would serve the spiritual needs of the two villages.

The Morol was quite confused by this request. Certainly, the villages could use a priest. But why would the man want to stay in that bungalow? This village could accommodate his family quite comfortably, and even rent-free. The man somewhat sadly explained that his wife had a medical condition and did not want to be seen in public. The Morol guessed that this might be leprosy. He then told the stranger about the bungalow being haunted by an evil spirit. The priest smiled and said that he also doubled as an exorcist. If necessary, he could perform any necessary rites to rid the house of any evil spirits.

So the headmen of the two villages discussed this and agreed. The bungalow at any rate did not have an owner and so the priest would probably be within his rights to move in anyway. The Morols told the stranger that the villagers could help him restore the bungalow and make it livable. The strange, who said he went by the name Priest Rudra, again alluded to his wife and said he that he was quite handy and could do all the work himself.

The very next day he arrived with his family in a motorcycle-trailer. It was a large box-shaped trailer in which he carried all his possessions. His wife and daughter sat squeezed on the backseat of the motorcycle as they traveled great distances. Thus the family was quite portable, the priest explained to the Morol.

Why all this information about this priest? This may be relevant since the arrival of the priest is the only new event that has happened to the two villages in a long long time. Otherwise the population is very stable and life is very routine. The very dark events that befell the villages after the priest's arrival might quite possibly be linked to disturbing the haunted bungalow, and setting the spirit loose in the forest. At least that is the current thinking of the villagers. This is not to say Priest Rudra is implicated in any way. He could just be an unwitting trigger to whatever is happening.

One morning about three months ago, the villagers woke up to sense that something was not right. First, those out on an early morning stroll saw that a khaki-colored police motorcycle was parked in front of the Morol's house. A very unusual sight. Then everyone slowly realized that all the songbirds had left overnight. Not only that. When they eventually strolled over to the Songbird Tree, they could tell that all the animal life had also left. There used to be squirrels aplenty, and some jackrabbits. Now the forest seemed to be dead. Not even the cicadas could be heard. No one could figure out what caused this.

The first villagers to reach the Songbird Tree that morning, including the Morol, discovered the body of a uniformed policeman on the ground next to the small ancient altar to the goddess Durga there. The idol had been toppled from its pedestal. This rustic stone idol had been installed by the early villagers, and is today considered the guardian deity of the forest. The village women visit there every day to offer flowers and fruits and other votive offerings.

The Morol identified policeman as a Sub-Inspector Chaudhury of Bithangal Police. The officer had visited the Morol the previous night and asked for direction to Priest Rudra's house, and then entered the forest in the evening to hike up to the hilltop. When the police from Srimangal arrived on the scene and interviewed the Morol, they asked him if he could remember anything else about that evening – anything out of the ordinary. The Morol reported that he had heard a long, low note of a flute from

the direction of the Songbird Tree shortly after the Sub-Inspector entered the forest that night.

The police had also brought along a doctor to examine the body. He concluded that the Sub-Inspector died of asphyxiation, but that there were no visible signs of violence. Rumors arose in the villages that the policeman must have witnessed some stark supernatural horror that caused him to choke and die.

Priest Rudra saw the commotion in the village from his hilltop house and came down about the same time the police arrived. He saw the body of the Sub-Inspector. He agreed with the villagers' theory that the death might be due to supernatural causes. He said that the policeman had defiled the goddess and thus disturbed the harmony of the forest. He said that Chaudhury could also be a Moslem name. Indeed when the police retrieved the warrant card from the victim's pocket, they found that the full name was Liaqat Chaudhury. This caused some consternation in the village. Defilement of a Hindu deity by a Moslem man was an incendiary situation in a nation with great communal tensions brewing just under the surface.

By the end of the day that day, it became clear that the songbirds had settled down in the haor for the night. They would never return to the Songbird Tree.

To the villagers, somehow there were here two deaths: the man died and the forest died. There was cast over the two villages a grey pall. Everyone focused on the priest’s theory that the defilement of the forest goddess was the root of the evil. The village women started praying to the goddess with extra fervor and extra offerings. Everyone believed that the fauna of the forest would soon be restored. In the meantime everyone avoided the forest at night. The trails through the forest that connected the two villages and the priest's bungalow were now used only if there was a pressing need. And even then no one would enter the forest alone.

About two weeks after this, a boy named Rupak Dastidar from Kakolimukhor had gone one afternoon to the other village to visit a friend there. Somehow the two boys fell asleep while playing and no one noticed them. When they woke up, it was already dark. In a great panic that his parents would be angry with him, Rupak started back through the dark forest alone, in spite of his friend's protests. To walk on the road

encircling the forest would have taken Rupak a lot longer, compounding his predicament.

A little later that evening an anxious Dipak Dastidar, father of Rupak, bicycled along that road to reach Kakolihaor. There he heard from Rupak's friend what had happened. As these two were standing at the trailhead and talking, they both heard a long, low note of a flute from the forest, and thought it rather strange. No manmade sounds were expected from the forest. Anyway, Dastidar and a few other young men from this village now started on the trails with lanterns in hand. They found a dazed Rupak squatting under the Songbird Tree.

He looked like a boy zombie. He neither spoke nor reacted in any way to anything or anyone. He had simply withdrawn into himself and was not conscious of anything going around him. His eyes displayed no signs of his reacting to any sights. Next morning the villagers took him to the hospital in Srimangal, but the doctors could find nothing physically wrong with him. So they all came back home.

The doctors then wrote a letter to an expert in a mental health institution in Calcutta, describing everything surrounding the transformation of Rupak, and adding the villagers' theory that the boy may have witnessed something most horrific. A few days later the answer came. The Calcutta doctors wrote that the best chance of treating the boy – and a very good chance it was – was to find out what exactly frightened him.

Now, on that very same evening and about the same hour that this had happened to Rupak, Oldman Osman, a genial octogenarian who lived alone and was loved by all, was holding his nightly hooch session on the porch of the General Store. He drank only at night and only here so that children would not witness drinking. The villagers did not object because they saw this as a time of welcome forgetfulness for the sad old man. This location where he sat offers a clear view of the canopy and even part of the trunk of the Songbird Tree.

The following morning when he saw Rupak in this state, Oldman Osman came out with a strange story that nobody believed. According to him, there was a long low note of flute from the direction of the Songbird Tree, following which the whole tree seemed to have come alive and was waving back and forth. The villagers quietly

ascribed this story to the old man's drunkenness, but he kept insisting all day that day to anyone who would listen to him that this had something to do with what had happened to Rupak. The following morning he was found dead under the Songbird Tree – dead of heart failure.

Strangely, the night Oldman Osman died, the people in a house close to the Songbird Tree said that they heard a long, low note of flute from that direction. They remembered it because it was most unusual to hear such a sound from the forest.

Once again, the police had precious little to go on. Groups of policemen held vigil in the forest in the hope of sighting something. But they saw nothing. Nor did they ever hear that flute.

The theory of divine retribution now became replaced by the theory that the evil spirit from the bungalow was stalking the forest. Rupak Dastidar and Oldman Osman were victims of this spirit which, it was clear, was lurking in or around the Songbird Tree.

Then one villager who was a honeybee gatherer, suggested smoking the entire Songbird Tree. If there were any critters, insects or locusts or anything like that, they could not survive the smoke and would come out.

Priest Rudra also liked the idea from his priestly standpoint, and said it should be performed as a religious rite. Firewood was piled up in a ring around the trunk of the tree. The priest then said some prayers and then dusted the stack with incense and myrrh. He continued his prayers and chanting into the evening and asked the villagers to come for the lighting ceremony at seven the next morning, an auspicious hour according to the priest's almanac.

The firewood stack was lit. As the flames started to leap, water was sprinkled on the stacks to create dense steamy smoke that would not hurt the foliage. One could clearly see the annular column of smoke rise thickly through the foliage of the canopy. The smell of incense and myrrh was strong. By the time the fire went out around noon, nothing visible had happened to the canopy.

After this, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that some supernatural evil was at work. Priest Rudra was approached with the proposal of performing an exorcism, like

the one he would have performed for the haunted bungalow had the evil spirit there not fled to the forest. But this would be no ordinary exorcism, the priest said. This would have to be a Whole Forest Exorcism, involving his pacing round and round over the forest, sprinkling holy water and chanting. So the villagers started discussing this plan in right earnest.

Then yesterday at about noon, a house that was just down from the Songbird Tree found a small baby girl missing. The backyard of the house was wide open to the forest. The mother had rubbed mustard oil all over the baby and left her in the sun for a bit, before giving her a bath. This is normal practice. The mother had then gone about her chores for only a few minutes. When she came back, the baby was gone. She had vanished without any kind of a trace.

The villagers sent for the police even as they started their own search. This time the police wanted to leave nothing out. They borrowed two bloodhounds from a sahib plantation owner, along with the dogs' keeper. The dogs were given a scent of the baby's bed linen and nudged towards the forest. But suddenly they became very agitated. They wanted to go away from the forest. They started straining at the leash and looking quite fearsome. At the points the keeper took them back to their van. He said he had never known the dogs to act that way.

So this morning at the village meeting it was decided to seek your help as a last resort before letting the priest take over.

My orders are to wait for you to come with us, if you would agree to do so, and place myself and the driver and the jeep at your disposal for as long as you need us. Whatever else you need, just ask us. The village will put you up. It will not have much by the way of the creature comfort, but the people there are most warm and hospitable.

III. Jiyon Jana accepts

As the Inspector stopped, he was pleased to see signs of intense curiosity in the faces of his listeners who had remained totally silent throughout the narrative. Jiyon now looked at Longjam. The latter said: "I think Foreman Najibullah can hold down the fort here for a few days. The work is all cut out and he knows what to do."

After briefing Najibullah, Jiyon and Longjam picked up their compact travel bags and they were off by two pm. Jiyon and Inspector Ferdous sat in the back of the jeep so they could talk. Jiyon asked Ferdous to tell him what the latter knew about the villagers.

As Ferdous filled Jiyon in, he came to the point where Priest Rudra had asked for one hundred thousand rupees, one lac rupees that is, from the village. Jiyon was visibly taken aback: "That is a king's ransom! This can set him and his family up for the rest of his natural life."

"Yes, he said so himself quite frankly. But the villagers look at it in a positive way. They do not seem to think the priest is being unreasonable or trying to extort money or anything like that.

"But it is because of his asking such a large sum that we wanted to look at him closely. We could not find out much about him at all, given that his past life was in Burma. But that brings us to the issue of why the Sub-Inspector Chaudhury from Bithangal went to see the priest."

"Go on."

"The story the Bithangal police and the Morol have pieced together is this: The Sub-Inspector learned about Priest Rudra settling in the hilltop bungalow when the latter came to Bithangal in his motorcycle-trailer to buy some goats. Bithangal is a very compact town and everyone knows everything that goes on there. And when someone drives in in that contraption and asks to buy as many as five goats, it raises eyebrows. And when he plonked down the full asking price for the goats without the expected haggling, he made an even greater impression. People asked the priest casual questions and learned that he needed the goats for steady supply of fresh milk

for his daughter and his wife. They were vegetarians and needed some wholesome milk and milk products in their diet.

"Now, on the day the Sub-Inspector would come to Kakolimukhor , he had received a standard bulletin telegram from some other police department requesting information about a person the senders of the telegram were interested in. The SI somehow must have had had a hunch, for he set out on his own with the telegram in his pocket – before it was officially logged in. Nobody else saw the telegram or knew anything about its content. In the village the SI saw the Morol, and asked to be directed to the house of the priest. At the priest's house the wife told him her husband would not be back until seven in the evening. The SI went away, promising to return at that time. He spent some time in the area, and about seven-thirty, told the Morol to look after his motorcycle while he hiked up the hill to the priest's house. It was very dark that night and the Morol gave the SI a flashlight.

"The priest said later that he indeed was back home by seven but that the SI never arrived at his home. The flashlight was found next to the SI under the tree. The telegram was not found on the SI's person. Nor could Bithangal police determine what police department had sent the telegram or who its subject was."

"I see," said Jiyon. "OK, let me absorb all that information. Now there is one thing we need from you if we are going to go into that forest and confront whatever it is. Longjam and I both have permits to carry firearms. But we did not bring any firearms from Khulna. So could you arrange for us to have a standard police issue rifle, and a twelve-gauge shotgun with hunting torch mount? For the shotgun I would like some No. 2 buckshot cartridges and a few slugs."

"Consider it done."

IV. They arrive in the village

It was just after three pm when they arrived in the village and daylight was still strong. They could not miss that spreading tree as they drove in. A transfixed Jiyon stared at its canopy as the jeep pulled into the schoolhouse courtyard. There the Morol and few other people had been huddling.

After introductions were made the Inspector left, promising to return before dark. The Morol offered to show the visitors to their living quarters and invited them to have some refreshment. But Jiyon said: "We would like to see whatever we can of the village and the forest while it is still daylight."

The villagers took heart at this, sensing that these visitors meant business. They were not here to dilly-dally or shilly-shally. The Morol and two young men accompanied Jiyon and Longjam as they walked in the direction of the Songbird Tree. The Morol kept pointing things out about the village to the visitors like an expert tour guide.

The village is built around an oval-shaped grassy central square. All houses face it. In the square are a schoolhouse, a small temple and a general store that doubles as a teahouse and a post office. Behind the row of houses to the east, the land starts to rise. The Songbird Tree is right behind these houses, at the base of that slope. From all the houses on the other side of the oval and from the oval itself, the canopy of the tree is clearly visible. The song of the birds, the Morol said, could be heard from every house in the village.

They reached the tree. The first thing Jiyon sensed was that the temperature in the shade of the canopy seemed a few degrees lower than the sunlit oval. To this sense of chill was added a foreboding by the unstable light-and-shadow pattern on the forest floor. Up the slope from here there were many trees, none as proliferated as this one though. The trunk of this tree was covered with soft creepers that climbed up to the canopy. It was easy to see why the birds chose this particular tree to congregate in.

The altar of the forest deity was a short distance from the base of the tree, in a niche cut into the slope of the hill. The slope here was made of stony outcrop denuded of vegetation and rose in semi-circular terraces up to the hilltop bungalow. The rest of the forest floor was soft, vegetation-covered soil.

As the villagers stood back, Jiyon and Longjam walked around the tree in very slow steps and then went up the slope a ways, looking intently both at the ground and at the treetops. They could not spot a single bird or squirrel or any other sign of animal life. Then they returned to where the villagers were standing.

Jiyon said to them: "All the trees look healthy. I do not see any signs of any blight in the vegetation on the ground. There does not seem to be any kind of tree disease or poisoning of the ground water. So I think we can leave out any nature causes of the departure of animal life."

"But, Sir, if you leave out nature causes, what remains?" asked one of the young villagers.

Jiyon looked at him thoughtfully, then said: "Let us see if we can find out."

As they returned, the Morol brought them to one of the houses around the oval and close to the Songbird Tree that had been sitting empty. It had been set up for the visitors as a guesthouse. Their luggage had already been placed here. One of the villagers, Ramvilash, had volunteered to look after the guests and was already working in the kitchen. The two bedrooms were minimal but comfortable, with fresh linens and mosquito nets. Jiyon was pleased to see that the back porch of the house directly faced the Songbird Tree.

Presently tea was served for everyone on the front porch which had some bamboo cane furniture – a few chairs, a bench and a table. They all sat down. As they were sipping tea, Jiyon asked the Morol to give as much detail as he could on each incident, adding that he had already received an overall briefing from Inspector Ferdous as far as the police side is concerned. Now he needed the minutest of details from the village side. The Morol proceeded to give a meticulous account, encourage by the fact that the visitors were losing no time in getting to the heart of the matter most inquisitively. He started with the arrival of the Sub-Inspector of Bithangal Police.

V. The Morol narrates

Just over three months ago late one afternoon there arrived in the village this policeman. He asked to see the village headman and was shown to me. He introduced himself as a Sub-Inspector Chaudhury of Bithangal Police. He said he had heard in the Bithangal town center that there was living hereabouts a Bengali man with a Burmese wife and a small daughter. He also said that the family owned five goats. The SI needed to talk to them in connection with a missing-person inquiry. I pressed him for more detail. He assured me that this was a routine inquiry and there were no charges against anyone. I then showed him the forest trail up to the priest's house. He left.

Shortly after seven that evening, he showed up at my doorstep again and said that the priest was not home when he visited the first time. He was going there again and the priest was expected back by now. He asked me to look after his motorcycle. He also asked me if I had a flashlight he could borrow. I loaned him mine, a very powerful light with a broad beam.

He never came back. I was worried on this account and could not sleep. So shortly before dawn I lit a hurricane lantern and started on the path to the priest's house. But at the foot of the outcrop as I looked under the Songbird Tree, I saw something that did not belong there. Upon a closer look I found the SI lying by the altar. I touched his neck for pulse, and looked for other signs of life. He was stone cold dead. Now I did something I have never told anyone – not even the police, and I am telling you in confidence just so you have every bit of information you need for your inquiry.

I saw that the deity had been toppled from the altar and was lying on the ground next to it. The SI's body was in such a state as to suggest that he had urinated on the deity, and was somehow felled even as he was doing this. I could also see that he was a Moslem, and realized my earlier error in habitually assuming from the name Chaudhury that he was a Hindu. Then the grave danger of the situation was driven home to me. A Moslem urinating on a Hindu deity – this news would almost surely spark nationwide communal rioting. So I made just enough changes to the scene to hide the urination aspect. Just doing up some buttons – you understand? The deity remained toppled.

I came back and at first light entered the forest with other villagers, and pretended to be surprised at the sight of the SI's body. Soon the priest also came down, upon seeing the commotion from his home. He said the Sub-Inspector had not come to his house the second time even though he was expected. The priest made a big thing about the SI, whose warrant card would identify him as a Moslem named Liaqat Chaudhury, having defiled the deity. Luckily this did not ignite any trouble immediately, the fact of the mysterious death of a man being paramount on everyone's mind.

Now on to the next incident. The boy Rupak Dastidar made a bold choice to walk through this accursed forest at night. It cost him his sanity. That very same evening, around the time Rupak was in the forest, Oldman Osman said he saw something. He was sitting in the porch of the General Store. So the Songbird Tree would in his full view. But this was at night – not a very dark night but still dark one – and Osman was surely somewhat inebriated. But we cannot believe that he was making things up. He was either seeing something or thinking that he was seeing something. The coincidence that he would see something on this very night seems to be a curious thing.

And what did Oldman Osman say he saw? I want to give you this in his own words as much I remember them: New branches shot out from the tree trunk and started waving like arms!

(Some fifteen years later Jiyon would recall this very description when he was reading a book called *The Day of the Triffids.* He felt rather privileged to have been personally introduced to the idea in the book long before it was written!)

Poor man Osman! He kept saying that if we could find out what it was about the tree then we might be able to treat Rupak. My guess is that when nobody would believe him, he decided to go to the tree the next night and get a clear (and possibly sober) view. That cost him his life. His heart was very weak anyway, and something caused it to fail.

Then yesterday noon, the Basu baby vanished – just plain vanished! We do not have a clue as to what might have transpired there. The baby was left out of sight only for a few minutes – and that is not unusual at all. No one expects any danger

here. Even as we are mindful of the danger in the forest, what could happen to a baby in the backyard of its home?

So that is a general account. I can answer any specific questions if it helps.

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As the Morol was finishing up his account, Inspector Ferdous' jeep pulled up. He took a rifle from the back of the jeep and handed it to Longjam, saying: "This is a Royal Enfield Three-naught-Three. You will feel right at home with it!"

Longjam smiled to acknowledge the Inspector's reference to his military background, and said: "We used to call them Jungle Carbines!"

He checked the bolt mechanism. It was well oiled and moved smoothly. The police driver now brought up a double-barrel 12-gauge shotgun, a five-battery hunting torch with a gun clamp, and a box of ammunition. Longjam took charge of all these and put them away in one of the bedrooms.

VI. A little tea before dinner

It was now dusk. As the four men sat together talking about the village, Ramvilash came over and said there was plenty of food if the Morol and the Inspector would like to stay for dinner. The Inspector accepted after assurances that his driver would also be fed. The Morol also would join, but that he had first to walk over to his home and tell his wife.

After the Morol left, Jiyon turned to the Inspector. "I want to take you back to the part of your account about the death of Sub-Inspector Chaudhury. I take it that you arrived with the first policemen on the scene and that the scene was left undisturbed as far as you could tell?"

"Yes on both."

"Please describe the scene as you saw it."

"The SI was laying on the ground, on his left side, in front of the altar – his face towards the altar. He was may be about 10 feet from the Songbird Tree. He was a small man. His posture as he lay was somewhat fetal. The stone deity had fallen from her pedestal, and was lying two feet from the body. Otherwise there was nothing out-of-the-ordinary or noteworthy about the scene."

"You said that Priest Rudra would later describe this as a scene of defilement of the deity. Did he actually use the term defilement, or were you using your own words?"

"I remember well that he used that word. Actually, it struck me as an unwarranted exaggeration. I mean, even if the SI had intentionally felled the statue, you could call it vandalism or even sacrilege. But defilement is not a word that would come to mind."

"Do you have any information as to whether the SI was a tough man – in the sense that he would be able to stand his ground in the face of some great horror?"

Inspector Shahryar searched his mind. Then he said: "All I can say from what I learned in the course of the investigation into his death is that he came to the service from the academia through a competitive exam. So I would think that he did not have much life experience in terms of the rough and tumble world."

"If you don't mind my saying so, Inspector," started Longjam, "It seems to me that the death of the SI was under-investigated. I mean, you did not even find out what that telegram was about. Certainly you could have gone to the telegraph office in Bithangal immediately and they would have remembered something about this telegram. That certainly seems odd."

Inspector Ferdous remained silent for several seconds. Then he spoke slowly: "We the police are all too painfully aware that this is the case. No sooner had our investigation started than the priest started agitating about defilement of a Hindu deity by a Moslem policeman. This was an incendiary situation. A high level decision was made to close the case quickly, and not let anyone stir the pot, so to speak."

"Are you saying that the priest cleverly scuttled an investigation that might lead you to find out the reason why the SI came to talk to him?"

"That is what I am saying."

"What is your real assessment of Priest Rudra, Inspector?"

"As I said before, he comes under immediate suspicion because he stands to gain a great deal of money from this whole business. He is also the only new element that was introduced into the otherwise tranquil local scene, and he is the one that disturbed the balance of the forest, if there is such a thing. But nothing actually connects him to anything that has gone on. The fact that he is a refugee from Burma makes it difficult for us to get any information about his past, except of course what he tells us himself." The Morol had come back. The cook now served a pre-dinner round of tea and snacks – an assortment of vegetable pakoras. Thus the collective mood immediately lifted. Longjam asked, quite casually: "Morol, can you paint a picture of how Priest Rudra fits into the village life?"

"Sure. After he arrived here with his wife and daughter and settled in the bungalow, he spent nearly a month renovating the house himself. The village young offered him help, but he very politely declined. He is actually a very powerful and sturdy man himself, not the conventional ascetic holy man we think of. He even cut a channel in the rocky outcrop around his house so that he could walk directly down from his house to the base of the Songbird Tree and into the village. Without this shortcut, he would have to take the long trail around the outcrop.

"There was already a garage which the priest fixed up to house his motorcycle trailer. He then built a fenced in corral on the grounds to keep his five goats. After about a month, he started coming down to the two villages to mingle and get acquainted. He developed a routine where he spends three days a week in our village and two in the other village during daytime, spreading his wares for sale, and being generally available for spiritual counsel. The wares are religious artifacts – amulets, talismans and such that he can customize for a person's particular malady. So the villagers got to know him pretty well. He is well liked in both villages.

"As to his personal life, that seems to be out of bounds. He discourages anyone from going to his house. In fact, I am the only one here that has seen his wife and his daughter. The wife is a bashful lady with a veil that covers most of her face. But you can tell that she is Burmese. The little girl – about three years old – is very pretty and seems to keep to herself.

"So that, in a nutshell, is what I know – unless you have specific questions."

"When he does his priestly duties – chanting and things – can you tell if he is a genuine priest?" asked Jiyon.

The Morol was taken aback. He recovered and replied: "I did not know he was under any suspicion! But now that I think of it, we villagers have no ability to tell if his Sanskrit chants and mantras are genuine. We are largely illiterate in that regard."

"OK," continued Jiyon, "Do you think, Morol, that tomorrow morning the four of us can walk up to the priest’s house and pay a visit without upsetting him and without arousing any suspicion in him that we are looking into him?"

"We can go up to the hilltop and see if he comes out to greet us. Then I will say that I brought you all there so as to give you a panoramic view of the villages and the haor. After that, it will be up to you to tactfully strike up a conversation. And if he invites us in, I will accept on everybody’s behalf."

The four agreed to execute this plan tomorrow at eight. A simple but delicious dinner was served, and the conversation turned to lighter things. After dinner, the Morol and the Inspector took their leave, promising to be back at eight in the morning.

VII. A sudden change of plans

Jiyon and Longjam came to the back porch of the house that offered a full-on view of this side of the Songbird Tree. There were two rattan easy-chairs there and they sat down cozily. In this semi-dark night barely a week before the new moon, the tree looked rather portentous and even ghostlike. Given what they knew, they could now imagine this tree as having some evil supernatural aspect to it. They could see the greatly ramified branches, and could almost imagine what Oldman Osman was saying. They stared for a long time while talking in a low voice. To Ramvilash going about his business inside the house, the impression was that the two guests were privately commiserating on something.

Jiyon asked: "Longjam, changing the subject a little, what is your reading on this defilement issue?"

"Well, I do agree that defilement was an odd word for the priest to use in the circumstances, unless he had reasons to use that word. That would mean that Priest Rudra had seen a different scene than Inspector Ferdous saw. So it is most likely that the priest saw the same scene that the Morol saw, before the Morol tampered with it. That means Priest Rudra was there in the vicinity, lurking perhaps.

"Now, I do not for a moment believe that this Sub-Inspector would defile the deity in any way. That leaves us with only one possibility. Priest Rudra staged the scene himself, the scene that the Morol later saw."

"I agree with that assessment," said Jiyon. "But that still leaves open the question: How did the Sub-Inspector die?"

Jiyon looked at his radium-dial wrist-watch. It was after nine pm. He said: "OK, Longjam, let us shed some light on the canopy." Longjam went inside the house and picked up the hunting torch. Ramvilash had not seen it before. Now as he saw it he remarked: "I have never seen a torch this long!"

Longjam came back to the porch. Aiming the torch towards the canopy, he turned on the bright-as-daylight beam of light.

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Ramvilash saw the two men come staggering into the house, looking quite ashen and disheveled. Longjam kept saying: "The horror … the horror …" while visibly trembling. Jiyon sat down on the floor ponderously and covered his face.

Ramvilash became very confused. He got them some cold water to sprinkle on their faces and said: "What has happened to you Babus? Shall I go fetch some help? Shall I go and fetch the Morol?"

In a few minutes Jiyon composed himself and told Ramvilash they would soon be all right, but that it would help if they could get some strong hot tea with lots of milk and sugar. Ramvilash immediately complied. Jiyon then bade him goodnight. The still-confused helper left, saying he would come back and serve breakfast at six. Longjam was still babbling.

The Morol and the Inspector arrived about seven as Jiyon and Longjam – still looking out of sorts – were having breakfast on the front porch. The two visitors sat down at the table and accepted the offer of tea. After breakfast the visitors were ushered in to a bedroom for a private closed-door conference. Or that is what Ramvilash surmised. All four men emerged at around eight, looking very grim. Ignoring questions from the villagers who had gathered to see how things were progressing, the four men started for the hilltop. Ramvilash now held court, and told the villagers what he had observed last night and what he thought was going on. He concluded: "So as soon as they pointed that very long torch at the canopy and turned it on they saw something most terrifying. They were totally disconcerted, and physically ill. I am guessing that they will beg out of this. That is what I think they were discussing in the closed bedroom."

With their curiosity thus primed, the villagers decided to await the return of the four men from the hilltop.

A short walk brought the men to the Songbird Tree. From here they had to climb the outcrop along the path carved in it. It looked like a smooth channel, almost as though it were made by flowing water over geological times. Obviously the priest had to work hard at it, but the rock was rather soft. There were footholds cut in this channel so that walking along it was not difficult. Rather a strange approach – to cut

a channel and then make footholds in it rather than just carving out a stair steps, Longjam thought.

When they gained the top of the hill, they saw a flat expanse with the British-era two-story bungalow in the middle. The first structure they saw was a detached box-shaped concrete-walled shed which was obviously a garage. Longjam observed that its large wooden door was kept pad-locked. He looked closely at the padlock. The motorcycle-trailer of course is a valuable property to keep under lock and key, he remarked to Jiyon.

Close by, there were three goats munching on some vegetation inside a bamboo-fence corral. Upon that the Morol remarked: "Strange! Priest Rudra had bought five goats when he came here. And they are vegetarians. What happened to the other two goats?!"

Behind the garage, and some distance away, was a small pond full of water to its brim. There were mounds of dug-up earth around it. The Morol explained that Priest Rudra dug this pond himself. It was OK for the rainy season, June to December, but afterwards it may not have much water. The priest would have to find an alternative source of water, because the old tube well for the bungalow was no longer workable.

Behind the garage was the brick-and-mortar building, the bungalow. It had crumbled at the edges, but large portions of it were still livable. The upper story had large windows all around, make it look like the view deck of a passenger ship.

As they looked back down on the village of Kakolimukhor, the whole expanse of the village stood clear before them. They could see the top of the Songbird Tree and the edge of the forest. The comings and goings in the village oval were clearly visible, although it might be difficult to recognize people unless there was something recognizable about them – clothing, walking posture etc.

There was no movement discernible in the house in reaction to the arrival of the party. So they walked round the bungalow and came to the other side to view the village of Kakolihaor and the haor itself. Again, the vista was crystal clear. On the marshland, the haor, were a number of large trees. Even from here they could see the birds on treetops, the birds that had fled from the Songbird Tree. Some seemed to be

looking right this way, toward this hill. Wistfully so, Jiyon sensed. They wanted to return to the Songbird Tree!

As they came around now to the front of the house they saw that Priest Rudra, looking annoyed, had come out of the house and was standing defiantly on the front veranda. The Morol quickly greeted him and explained that these were the expected visitors Jiyon Jana and Longjam Shantikumar, and that they wanted to see the lay of the land from the hilltop. The Inspector the priest already knew of course. "I hope this is not an intrusion, Maharaj," concluded the Morol.

Upon this the priest's stance softened visibly. In a hail-fellow-well-met voice, he said: "Not in the least, Morol. I am most honored to meet the great adventurers. And hello, Inspector! Would you gentlemen grace my home by coming in and having a cup of tea?"

As previously agreed among the party, the Morol accepted this invitation to go inside the house. As they were doing so, Jiyon and Longjam sized up the priest. He indeed was a large and powerful man, and also looked quite agile. He was clean-shaven except for a rather oversized handlebar moustache whose tips met up with the sideburns. Not the conventional ascetic, as the Morol had said. He was wearing a white dhoti and an equally white tee-shirt. The shirt material was thin enough that they could see the Brahmin's sacred thread through it. Jiyon know which shoulder the thread should hang from, and the priest was wearing it correctly. So far there was no sign of any kind of deception here.

As they went through the front door, there was a staircase that led up to the upper story. Jiyon ran his eyes over what could be seen of the ground story, but there was mostly a hallway with nothing much to attract attention. The entire second story was one huge room, enclosed all around by windows. The room was airy as all the windows were open. On the floor here were spread out a few mattresses and cushions to sit on. There was no furniture.

The party took a 360-degree circular walk along the windows, the priest leading the way and pointing out the features of the landscape. Everything was visible from here. Jiyon took particular care to look at the canopy of the Songbird Tree from this high vantage. It looked perfectly normal, as canopies go.

The priest now called out: "Lakshmi, O my dear daughter Lakshmi!" and in a minute there came up a little girl about three or four years old. The first thing one noticed about her is that she was very fair and her facial features were very well-defined – the nose, the mouth, the eyelids and the eyebrows. Altogether she brought to one's mind the chiseled marble statue of some Greek goddess. Jiyon thought of how ethnic mixing sometimes produced most beautiful babies. And to accentuate this striking appearance, she had a black mole on the bridge of her nose. She now looked from one visitor to another and greeted everyone silently with a nod of her head, and a very sweet smile to go with that.

"Lakshmi, would you ask Mother to please prepare tea for our visitors?" said Priest Rudra, running the palm of his hand lovingly over her head.

As she left, they all sat down on the mattresses and the cushions. Jiyon looked at the priest: "Maharaj, I hope we do not cause you any ire by coming here and intruding on your turf."

Priest Rudra laughed most jovially: "Think nothing of it! I am glad that you have come, and I – more than anyone else – wish you success. Even though I stand to gain from performing a religious exorcism, quite frankly I am not looking forward to this. And my wife and daughter are very upset that I agreed to do so. In fact, if there is any way I can be of use to you, I would like to help."

"Thank you. We might take you up on this offer," Jiyon took over. " But in the meantime, tell us what the ceremony of a Whole Forest Exorcism is. All I know about ritual chanting and such is the Gayatri Mantra, you know, *Om jabakusuma sankasham* etc!"

"Well, it is commendable that you know the Gayatri Mantra even though you are not a Brahmin. My reading of the situation is that some great and powerful evil has descended on one or both of the villages, and resides in that forest. I will confront that evil and command him in the names of Durga and Kali and Shiva to depart. It is a very long and elaborate process. I will go round the entire forest sprinkling holy water and Bel leaves. I will command the evil to leave in mantras prescribed in the scriptures."

"And what is your theory about the disappearance of Baby Basu? Do you suppose she is still alive?"

"I think the evil spirit demands some pristine sacrifice. That is why he took the innocent baby girl. I am not sure if the exorcism can bring her back. I would not wish to raise any hopes in the mind of the villagers in that regard."

"Thank you, Maharaj. Longjam, do you have anything particular in mind you would like to ask our host?"

"No, nothing related to the work at hand," said Longjam. "But Maharaj, I was interested to hear that you escaped from Burma and came to India as a refugee. I was posted in various parts of Burma with the India Command. Whereabouts are you from?"

"I am from a fishing village just outside Mandalay, right on the Irrawaddy. In fact the central gathering place of the villagers was the ghat on the river."

"You must have visited the nearby historical town Mingun then? I was stationed in that area for a while."

"Oh yes. It was just a bus ride from us."

Lakshmi appeared, carrying a tray rather large for her size. But she carried it with facility, and handed it to her father in athletic-like movement. The father accepted it also with precision movement. It was as though they habituated to working together in choreographed fashion. The priest now poured the tea as the girl handed round plates of salty snacks called Nimkis.

It was nearly nine-thirty. As the party got up to leave, the priest said: "I will be coming down to the village in a little bit also. I run a shop there. If there is anything more you can think to ask me, just walk over to the temple. I was wondering, Mr. Jana and Mr. Shantikumar, are you going to the forest tonight to confront the evil with guns and things?"

"Actually, Maharaj, we just remembered that we have left some urgent business in Sylhet hanging, and we have to leave shortly. But we will be back Friday night and hold our vigil in the forest. Yes, we do have firearms for our protection, and will use them if we must."

The priest looked confused. Then he blurted out with a smirk: "Surely you are not having cold feet?!"

Jiyon smiled wryly and said: "We will be back Friday afternoon. If not, then Saturday. After Saturday night the show is all yours."

"Then I best get started under the assumption that I will after all have to go through with the exorcism. There is a lot of preparation to be done, and I do not want to push everything to the last minute if there is any question that you might not return."

"That would be a wise thing to do, Maharaj," interjected the Morol. The Inspector nodded in agreement. It seemed quite clear to the priest that the consensus among these two men was in favor of the cold feet proposition. Indeed, Jiyon and Longjam both looked a little sheepish.

VIII. Exeunt Jiyon and Longjam

Back at the guesthouse the villagers were squatting in the front yard. By now some had also come from the other village. As soon as they saw the party returning, they stood up, hoping to receive some kind of briefing as to what was going on. Jiyon and Longjam went straight into the house without saying anything while a grim-faced Morol and a distraught-looking Inspector faced the villagers.

"Boys, here is the current situation that I want you to pass on to both the villages. Our two visitors have suddenly remembered that they have left some urgent business unfinished in Sylhet and must return immediately. But they will be back Friday or Saturday. That is cutting it close. So I have concluded that we should start preparing for the Whole Forest Exorcism. If our visitors return and are able to solve this problem, then all shall be well. But if not, we should be fully ready to move on to the next step."

The Morol paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. But a young villager interjected: "Morol, we heard from Ramvilash that the Babus had seen something in the Songbird Tree last night and were most frightened. Are they having second thoughts?"

"Be that as it may, we will take them at their word that they will return. Now, about the exorcism. Today is Tuesday. I am calling a general meeting on Thursday morning at eight am. I will ask Ranjit Babu from the District office to come also. Now, every family will send the money to that meeting. I will collect them and count them in front of everyone, and then give the money to Ranjit Babu for safekeeping. He will return on Monday morning with this money plus the matching District funds. We will then be ready to hand these funds over to Priest Rudra. He has said that if the birds do not return in two weeks after the Whole Forest Exorcism, he will return the money. I will now go over to the temple and fill him in on this. Is everything clear?"

The villagers nodded somewhat uncertainly, looking quite crest-fallen. But they did not leave yet. About half an hour later, Jiyon and Longjam emerged with their travel bags packed, ready to leave. The police driver came and collected the guns and carried them back in plain view of the villagers. The two guests and the Inspector now boarded the jeep and they were off. The villagers stared vacantly at the receding

vehicle. Jiyon now saw the priest entering the village and waved goodbye. The priest waved back.

Jiyon and Longjam were sitting in the back of the jeep. From the passenger seat in the front the Inspector turned to look at them and asked: "I do not wish to press you for any theories but could you at least give me some clues as to what your line of thinking is?"

"We will. But first, can we drive by the other village and take a closer look at the haor?"

The jeep rounded the hill and brought them right to the edge of the haor. From here they had a clear view of some of the birds sitting on treetops. They looked for a long while, walked around a little and looked at the birds from various angles, and were back on their way.

"First let us hear from Longjam as to what his impressions of Priest Rudra are," said Jiyon.

"First of all, the priest is not from Burma. He said he lived near Mandalay on the Irrawaddy, and Mingun was a bus ride away. Actually, Mingun is on the other side of the river and a boat is the only way to get there. Second, he is not a priest. Boss Babu gave him some words from the Sun Worship chant and called it the Gayatri Mantra. Both these chants are known to every Brahmin that wears a sacred thread. But the priest did not spot this obvious error. Third, a thick handlebar moustache is a clever way to disguise your appearance without arousing suspicion that you are hiding, as would be in the case of bushy a beard covering the whole face. Fourth, that padlock on the garage is a new Yale lock, a very expensive tamper-proof foreign-made thing. That seems to be little too much if all there is in the garage is an old motorcycle."

The Inspector’s mouth was literally agape in amazement. But before he could say anything, Jiyon picked up: "Very good, Longjam. To these observations I would add that the priest and his daughter both look unusually athletic. I mean, a homebound little girl could be thin or chubby, but not well-honed and agile as Lakshmi is. It is as though the father and the daughter are on some type of exercise regimen. And did you notice how the girl easily carried the heavy tea tray and then handed it to her

father with almost robotic hand movement, as though they were completely in tune with each other’s movements? I think this is significant. There are two other clues I will give you, Inspector: The scent dogs you brought in, and the birds in the haor."

At last it was the Inspector's turn to speak. "I am having a very bad attack of inferiority complex. I was there with you the whole time. I saw and heard what you saw and heard. And yet, I completely missed all these observations!"

Longjam laughed: "That is because you do not have a suspicious mind. You are too trusting of human nature."

The Inspector replied: "That may be so. But I was referring more to the odds and ends of information you brought to bear on this case. Who would have thought that a policeman or an adventurer might benefit from knowing the lay of land in Burma or Sanskrit chants?!"

A smiling Jiyon now asked the Inspector: "Can you be available full time the next few days if necessary?"

"Absolutely," said the Inspector. "But what where you saying about the birds and the dogs?"

"The birds are expecting to return from the haor to the Songbird Tree. If this was a case of some tree disease or some jungle affliction, they would have flown away as far as they could. This suggests that they expect this to be a temporary thing. And surely dogs cannot smell evil spirit. These fierce dogs were cowered by some smell that was unfamiliar and terrifying to them, even though they are hunting dogs."

"I see," said the Inspector even as he was trying to absorb all this. Then he added: "Tell me what to do next, Mr. Jana."

"Where is the most likely place in East Bengal where a Bengali man would socially meet a Burmese woman and marry? It is where there is a mixing of Burmese and Bengali ethnicities. So first thing today, send a telegram to the Chittagong police asking if there is any open issue about a Bengali man with a Burmese wife and a three or four year old daughter. Include a physical description of the priest. Leave out the moustache. Mention the motorcycle-trailer. Also ask if they know anything about a

telegraphic bulletin about such a family, received by the Bithangal police – give the date on which Sub-Inspector Chaudhury received the telegram."

IX. The exorcism funds are collected

The village meeting was well attended on Thursday morning. Each family from the two villages was represented. On the dais sat the Morol, Ranjit Babu and Priest Rudra. There was a police constable standing behind Ranjit Babu, clearly for the purpose of guarding the money. There was going to be a great deal of accumulated cash.

The Morol received the money from each family, wrote out a receipt and placed the money in a metal box. After all the families tendered their share, the total money was counted again in full view. Then the box was transferred to Ranjit Babu who promised to return on Monday with the full amount of one lac rupees. Then the Morol said: "Unless there are any issues anyone has, we will bring the meeting to a close."

Dipak Dastidar, father of the boy Rupak, stood up. He asked: "If the exorcism succeeds, does this mean that my boy will be cured automatically? If not, will we at least know what exactly it was that he saw in the forest that terrified him so?"

The question was intended for Priest Rudra and he took it. "I am afraid the exorcism can only rid the forest of the evil and cannot undo any damages. Neither can it cure Rupak nor can it bring back the baby."

"But the Calcutta doctors have said that if we knew what Rupak saw, then they would have a very good chance of curing him. Now you are telling me that we will go through this whole process but that my boy will stay the way he is. I cannot accept this. So tonight after dark I will go to the Songbird Tree, myself alone. Do not anyone even think of coming with me or watching me from hiding, for the evil has never showed itself except to a defenseless person alone in the forest. I will see if I can coax out whatever it is and take a good look at it."

There arose a murmur of disapproval. One villager said: "Dipak, you will face the same fate as your son. You may even die. In either case, how will this help your son?"

Another villager added: "At least wait until Saturday to see if the city Babus come back and confront the evil."

"The Babus will not come back," replied Dipak Dastidar. "Ramvilash saw stark fear in their eyes. They will not come back. No, my mind is made up. I am entering

the forest tonight and coming back with a good description of the horror for the head doctors to work with."

The Morol intervened: "Dipak, I strongly urge that you not do this. However, we have all failed your son, and are now about to leave him behind the way he is. So who are we to dissuade you? All I say is think this over most carefully and talk it out with your wife. All right, the meeting is adjourned."

The Morol then spoke privately to the priest: "Can you come to my home about seven this evening say, so that we can go over the details of the exorcism plan. I am quite certain that that is the route we have to take. Unless of course this new development with Dipak Dastidar turns up something that needs to be followed up before we go to exorcism. I think we can finish up our discussion in an hour so that you can go home to dinner by eight."

Priest Rudra agreed to come promptly at seven. As he was about to leave, the Morol said somewhat hesitantly and in a conspiratorial voice: "A great deal of money is within your reach. The mound of hard cash is all there to be just handed over to you Monday morning. And in no small measure this is due to me. You understand what I am saying?"

The priest looked a little surprised. He seemed to be considering in his mind what he had just heard. Then he said in almost a whisper: "OK, I will take care of you as long as your demands are reasonable. We can discuss this tonight."

X. The horror

In the end the villagers, on the Morol's advice, agreed not to interfere in any way with Dipak's plan. So in the evening the village went to sleep just as it did every evening. The only light that stayed on was a hurricane lamp in Dipak Dastidar’s porch.

Just after one in the morning Dipak took the lamp from its bracket and started for the Songbird Tree. It was slightly chilly and so he had wrapped himself in a warm chador. He had also covered his ears with a woolen muffler, running it over his head and under his chin.

In this dark night, the lantern created a fairly large sphere of general visibility. At least the gross feature of things could be seen. In a few minutes he arrived under the Songbird Tree. He then went to the altar and stood there for a while. He came back and found a spot about thirty feet from the tree trunk, and sat down on the ground with the lantern by his side. Now it was waiting. Dipak kept his eyes fixed on the trunk and the lower portion of the canopy, thinking back to the description of Oldman Osman.

About half an hour passed, by Dipak's guess. He stood up and walked around the tree – first slowly and then vigorously, as if to attract the attention of the evil spirit and cause it to appear before him. Then he resumed his seat and pulled the chador tighter around him. He listened carefully for any sounds that were over and above the usual forest sounds.

And now there it was! No doubt about it. The long low note of a flute. A faint noise now of something stirring in the canopy. Dipak tuned his ears to and peeled his eyes on where the noise seemed to have come from. A few minutes passed. Then he saw. In the faint light of the hurricane lantern dispelling the darkness just a little, he saw it. From the trunk of the tree, from just below where the lowest branches shot out, there was sprouting a new branch! Not a new shoot, but a thick, fully formed branch. As its length kept growing ever so slowly, the branch kept swaying in all directions. Dipak felt great horror but still not a debilitating one. He kept his wits about. He remembered Oldman Osman. The branch kept lengthening and swaying, lengthening and swaying.

Even as Dipak now stood up, he let the chador and the muffler slide down from his body. The fully uniformed shape of Inspector Shahryar Ferdous was revealed. He undid the button of his holster and clasped the handle of the .455 Webley service revolver. Whatever he was facing, as long as it was of this world, the Inspector was sure this large caliber bullet would stop it. All he had to do is to retain his composure and not succumb to the horror. The Inspector steeled himself, picked up the lantern with his left hand and advanced a few steps towards the tree. He was now barely ten feet from the trunk.

The new branch had grown so long and was swaying so wildly that if it swung his way, its tip would be face to face with the Inspector. He held up the lantern high so he could have a good view.

It did swing his way, came face to face with him, and held steady there. The Inspector saw it. Even as his right hand was tightening on the revolver, his composure failed. He fainted and fell to the ground.

The tip of the branch hovered over the Inspector a bit and then swung away sidewise and upward.

Immediately two shadows emerged from the darkness of the forest. They laid down the weapons they were carrying. They advanced, grabbed the Inspector by the shoulders and quickly dragged him across the soft grassy floor to a place nearly thirty feet away from tree. They laid him down there and sprinkled some water on his face from a canteen. The Inspector revived.

Longjam asked: "Inspector, are you OK to stay here a while we take care of things?"

The Inspector nodded and said in a feeble voice: "Do not worry about me. Please be careful. Take my revolver."

Longjam took the Webley and stuck it his belt. Jiyon and Longjam returned to where the Inspector had been standing. The lantern had fallen on the ground and got extinguished. The branch had moved out a great distance, but now seemed to be swinging back, aiming their way.

When the tip of the branch was just a few feet away, Jiyon aimed the shotgun at it and turned on the hunting torch. The intensely bright beam caught fully the horror that was approaching them.

The monster serpent itself was fearsome enough. But its human head made it totally phantasmagoric, with all the intensity and all the meaning that the word evil could possibly conjure up. Brave men both, Jiyon and Longjam still had to struggle to not faint. But it became even more difficult when the human-headed serpent's face came closer. The face of a Greek goddess, very fair-skinned, with sharp nose and eyebrows. All these were accentuated by the black spot on the bridge of the nose. The sloe eyes were wincing in the intense light.

Out of sheer momentum the head continued along its swinging arc, and there was little doubt that it would come back and settle before them. What would it then do to them?

Jiyon spoke very quickly in telegraphic language: "Longjam, nothing supernatural … priest's daughter wearing snake suit climbed into mouth of python …a make-believe human-serpent … a simple hunting issue… when it comes around, you yank the girl out of the mouth, lay her down by Inspector and be ready to back me up with the rifle … Clear, Longjam?"

Longjam realized that Jiyon was taking on the more dangerous part of the task ahead. But this was no time to be debating.

"Clear, Boss Babu," replied Longjam as he was laying down the rifle and wiping his palms on his trouser to get a good grip.

As soon as the head was within his reach, Longjam caught the girl's shoulder in a vice grip and gave her as hard and as sudden a yank as he could. The girl, wearing a suit made of snake skin right up to her neckline, easily slid out. Longjam noticed a steel hook contraption attached to the girls shoulders to prevent the snake from drawing her in further into its mouth. He carried her to the Inspector, laid her down and said: "Look after her." He turned on his heels and came back to pick up his rifle.

As soon as the snake's mouth was empty, it opened it wide, right in front of Jiyon's face. The latter, who thought that he had come to terms with the terror, realized that

this was more than he could take. The huge jaws, the fleshy pink interior, the fangs and the view of the channel of the throat through which a victim would slither down slowly – all this was too much even for the bravest of man. But instinctively, Jiyon stuck the barrel of the shotgun several inched within this mouth and pulled the front trigger. There was tremendous report, and the charge of No. 2 buckshot sprayed the interior of the snake's mouth. Jiyon got ready to fire the fatal shot, the slug in the other chamber. But the mouth started moving. He managed to fire the slug but missed. He was out of ammunition in the breech, and there was no time to reload.

But Jiyon saw through the corner of eyes Longjam come up by his side and felt relieved. At that instant the snake gave a violent sidewise jerk of his head, hitting Longjam who fell to the ground. His rifle was thrown several feet away.

The snake opened its mouth even wider and started to come at Jiyon's head. It was clear that it would swallow his head and shoulder at the first go and then would slowly pull in the rest of the body. Jiyon went rather numb. But he managed to keep the torch pointed at the mouth so that Longjam could fire a shot on recovering his rifle.

Now the snake lowered its head slightly, perhaps out of the pain from the damage caused by buckshot charge. As it did so, Jiyon's eyes were looking straight into the snake's eyes, barely a foot away. Jiyon felt he was looking straight into the abyss of hell. Such was the depth of evil he saw there that he went completely numb. He was petrified.

From his lying position, Longjam could not see how he could get up, recover the rifle and fire a shot in time to save Jiyon. From where he was he could see the snake's head . He pulled out the Webley and held it in a two-handed grip. But he did not have a clear line of fire. Jiyon's head was obstructing it.

He shouted: "Boss Babu, run! Get away! Fall back! Give me a line of fire!" But there was no reaction from Jiyon. Just then, the snake moved its head back about a foot, preparing to make the final strike. For a fleeting moment, Longjam saw the pink, fleshy roof of the snake's mouth, just behind the fangs. He emptied all the six chambers of the revolver into that target, in three groups of two shots. The head took on the appearance of a lump of minced meat, but still came towards Jiyon's head.

Jiyon came to and managed to move back out of reach. In a slow motion, the snake's head fell towards the ground.

Still stunned, Jiyon and Longjam now saw that the body of the snake was still wreathing and wiggling on the ground even as its tail was still sliding down the trunk of the tree. At this moment there came from the back of the tree a tall figure and shouted: "What have you done to my daughter? What have you done to my darling daughter?"

As the priest was advancing towards them, a flute in his left hand a machete in the right, he stumbled on the snake's body. To his abject horror Jiyon pointed the torch to the location and saw the snake coil round the priest with lightning speed and start to crush him. The priest body seemed to bend in most unnatural angles and his face had a vicious, contorted look. Jiyon and Longjam could hear bones break. Jiyon said slowly: "Longjam, I do not think we can do anything to save him. He will die a slow death."

As he said so, they saw the priest look in their direction and point to his temple with the index finger of his right hand, clearly appealing for them to shoot him and put him out of his suffering. Longjam had picked up the rifle by now. He looked at Jiyon. Jiyon said: "Longjam, I do not know the legalities of our shooting a man who is legally alive, regardless of the circumstances. Euthanasia is not legal. I suggest we not do anything."

Jiyon now moved the beam of the torch along the length of the snake's body and stopped it where there was a bulge. "The baby?" asked Longjam. Jiyon nodded.

XI. The cover up

The Morol was staying alert and was listening for the Inspector's whistle that would signal him to come to the Songbird Tree. The police at the edge of the forest had orders to not let anyone else into the forest until the clearance from the Inspector. But when they heard as many as eight loud gun shots the Morol decided to start anyway, with a lantern in hand.

The sight he saw turned his stomach and he nearly retched. He then steadied himself by clutching Longjam's proffered hand.

The Morol now saw Jiyon and the Inspector standing together, and a creature half human, half snake lying on the ground.

Jiyon spoke: "Listen carefully because we need to do several things before this whole business becomes public. I will explain what was going on here later. Right now, the first thing we need to do is to decide what to do about the baby in the snake's belly. The body must still be fairly intact. Do you want to tell the parents or do you want to hide the truth from them? My suggestion is that we cut open the baby and wrap it in ample cloth – never to be unwrapped again – and hand the bundle over to the parents for a proper funeral with full religious ceremony. That would at least bring some closure, and spare them lifelong trauma. We will tell the parents that the baby was found dead in the hilltop bungalow. Would you go along with this, Inspector?"

The Inspector nodded and the Morol murmured agreement. Longjam took out a long hunting knife from his belt and held it up. "If you would do this, fine. If not, I can do it."

The Morol looked at the knife for a few seconds, and took it most resolutely. As he looked at Longjam, the latter said: "Make sure that afterwards you turn the incision side towards the ground. We will explain the spilled blood as being the result of gunshot. Wrap the baby completely and in many folds with that chador over there on the ground."

In about fifteen minutes the Morol was finished. He had wiped his hands clean on the grass. Jiyon asked him if he was all right to get on with the next task, and the Morol nodded. "Now, the little girl wearing the snake skin suit. Before we take it off

her, bring the boy Rupak here and let him see and understand that the sight he saw has a perfectly natural explanation. Then give the little girl to the village women to take care of for now. I do not think she is culpable in any way. She is just a victim. May be she will be able to gain a normal life with some care and loving. But that is up to the authorities."

The Morol went away. A little later he came back dragging the boy Rupak almost by force, and Jiyon took charge. He led the boy by hand and showed him the dead snake. Longjam brought the girl Lakshmi and had her stand near the mouth of the snake. Then Lakshmi stuck her feet inside the snake's mouth to illustrate the process of assembly. Jiyon explained how the human-snake was formed. They saw some reactions on the boys face.

As the Morol took Rupak back, Inspector Ferdous asked: "So did the priest feed the baby to the snake?"

"I think not," replied Jiyon. "A python this size probably eats a small animal every couple of months. This one has eaten two goats in four months. So perhaps it was hungry again and ventured down from the canopy on its own, when neither the priest nor his daughter was watching. It then took the first edible thing it could find."

"And how did Sub-Inspector Chaudhury die?"

"My guess is that he lost consciousness upon witnessing the horror. But he did not die. The priest finished him off by covering his nose and mouth with bare hands."

A little later the Morol returned.

"So now," Jiyon continued: "Inspector, let your men take over from here. Longjam and I will explain everything to the villagers tomorrow morning. It is now nearly two pm, but I do not think any of us will be able to sleep. Is there any chance of some strong hot tea?"

"Absolutely," said the Morol. "Let's go to my house."

The Inspector joined the three men as they walking towards the edge of the forest, since he needed to summon his men waiting there. Jiyon said to the Morol as they were walking back: "The priest's wife will no doubt go to prison as an accomplice

and a murderer. May be you can engineer things so that Baby Basu's parents can adopt this little girl, if Inspector Ferdous will help with the formalities."

"I will help," said the Inspector.

"A daughter lost and a daughter gained! I have not doubt the parents will want her. She will have a most loving and normal home," said the Morol.

Later, as Jiyon and Longjam were seated in the Morol's house and the latter was in the kitchen helping his just-awakened wife make tea, Jiyon said in a low voice to Longjam: "That was close, Longjam!"

Longjam understood this to be a 'Thank you for saving my life' in that special way of speaking that develops between friends who have watched each other's back for a long time. He nodded slightly in full acknowledgement.

XII. As the adventurer himself tells it

By eight in the morning the villagers had settled down in front of the guesthouse, hoping for a blow-by-blow account. Jiyon and Longjam, joined by the Inspector and the Morol, had eaten an especially hearty breakfast prepared by Ramvilash and were on their third round of tea. They all came out to the porch, teacups in hand. There was just enough space left on the porch for the four of them to seat down on the chairs. The rest of the porch was filled by young boys and girls sitting cross-legged on the floor. On the ground just down from the porch sat a couple of rows of boys and girls. Beyond that the villagers stood round in a semi-circle. The women had not come though. And the Morol had directed that small children not come.

The Morol spoke first. "Our visitors and the Inspector have kindly agreed to take the time to fill us in completely on the events of the past few days. This is good, for we certainly deserve to know the full truth, we who have suffered all this time. The present situation as you may have already heard is that Priest Rudra is dead. The police are now in his bungalow and have taken his wife into custody. The little girl is with the Basu family and is being taken care of there. The body of Baby Basu was recovered from the bungalow and the village will observe full religious cremation ceremony tomorrow. We will bring a real priest from Srimangal for this. Rupak has already started to speak and should recover fully without the need of any doctors, thanks to our visitors. You will all get all your money back, and the village will be at peace. The songbirds should return to the forest from the haor in a matter of days. Now I will let these gentlemen take over."

Inspector Ferdous took over. "I will explain to you why we had to engage in a little deception with the village, before turning the floor over to Mr. Jana and Sergeant Shantikumar. Shortly after coming here Mr. Jana concluded that there was no way to confront this evil or to make it appear before us unless one defenseless person went alone in the forest. There was no point to groups of people holding vigil in the forest with guns and all. But Mr. Jana also did not want anyone to know that he planned to trap the evil.

"So he created the impression among you all that the great adventurers were so scared that they were fleeing with their tails between their legs. The Morol of course was in on this plan, and he in turn took Dipak Dastidar in his confidence. Mr.

Dastidar, fortunately for us, gave a fine performance at the village meeting. Of course we were never going to send him in harm's way. Instead, at night when the Morol kept the priest in conference in his house, I came into the Dastidar house and took his place.

"Another purpose to the meeting on Thursday was to lull the priest into thinking that everything was going his way. He saw the money that was coming to him right in front of him, a few inches from him in fact. Cold, hard cash. And to make him even more believing, the Morol privately asked him for a kickback. That left no room for any suspicion in the priest’s mind that anything was amiss.

"The rest of the story you will hear from our visitors, or I should say, our saviors."

Jiyon looked at Longjam. Longjam nodded and started to speak. "OK, let me tell you the story in the sequence in which it developed. Now, even before we arrived here on Monday afternoon, the thing that had struck us as the most significant – based on the Inspector's very thorough briefing – is the conduct of the two bloodhounds brought to track Baby Basu's scent. These are hunting dogs and are used to track all kinds of jungle scents. If they smelled a tiger or lion, say, they might become excited, but surely they would not retreat the way they did in this case. And surely they cannot smell ghosts. So that left us with a puzzle as to what real-life thing it was that the dogs had smelled and became so afraid.

"The following morning as we were leaving, the Inspector drove us through Kakolihaor and we stopped to look at the haor. As we had heard, the birds that had left the Songbird Tree were sitting on the treetops there, in that marshland. It appeared that they were looking wistfully towards the Songbird Tree, perhaps hoping to come back someday. But when we looked closer, we noticed that some of them were actually gazing in the direction of the hilltop, as though they sensed that that is where the object of their fear was. The animals have a sense about such things that we humans do not, but we can use their sense to our advantage

"As you know, before going to the haor, we had visited Priest Rudra in his home this morning, and conducted a casual conversation. A little discussion of Burma convinced us that he was not a refugee from Burma. We also tested his knowledge of

the Sanskrit scriptures, especially things that a priest would know. And we became convince that he was not even a priest. Not a Brahmin even.

"So now we became focused on the priest. That brought to our mind one fact whose significance we had missed earlier. On the morning that Sub-Inspector Chaudhury was found dead, the priest tried to hang a communal hatred issue on the incident. And it caused the police to quickly close the investigation. That was an understandable thing for the police to do. However, if that investigation could have been done with proper diligence, things might have gone very differently.

"Why did the Sub-Inspector run out of the office with a telegram in his hand without telling anyone anything or without logging the telegram in? We can only guess that may be he wanted to have the entire credit of nabbing an important fugitive the telegram described. But he died trying to do so and the telegram vanished. No one knew what it was about or where it originated. So that was another thing we considered.

"Let us put it all together. We have a Bengali man with a Burmese wife and a little daughter who all came here about four month ago. About three months ago Sub-Inspector Chaudhury came looking for him and lost his life under the Songbird Tree. The dogs told us there is some real-life danger from the Songbird Tree and the birds in the haor told us that the danger may be connected to the hilltop bungalow.

"Where is a Bengali young man most likely to meet a Burmese young woman and become engaged? Where there is a Burmese population in East Bengal. And there is only one such place, the southern part of the state adjoining Burma. And the central police headquarters for that region is in Chittagong. So we asked Inspector Ferdous to send a query telegram to the Chittagong Police. The response came only yesterday afternoon as we were starting to come here. I will read the telegram to you:

TO SRIMANGAL POLICE ATTN INSPECTOR SHAHRYAR FERDOUS REF YOUR ENQUIRY SAID FAMILY KNOWN TO US STOP SUBINSPECTOR CHAUDHURY POSSIBLY ACTED ON OUR BULLETIN TELEGRAM OF SAME DATE STOP DETAILS WITH TWO CHITTAGONG OFFICERS DISPATCHED TO SRIMANGAL TODAY STOP DO NOT ACT TILL THEIR

ARRIVAL STOP SITUATION EXTREMELY DANGEROUS STOP CHITTAGONG POLICE BY DSP VIJAY MATHUR

"Unfortunately, the Chittagong officers will not arrive until this morning, and we had to act last night according to the plans we had set in motion. The officers will be brought here directly they arrive in Srimangal railway station, and we may be able to hear from them in a little while. Anyway, we had to go into the forest not knowing what it was that we were facing, and what the priest was wanted for.

"And then last night happened. That brings us to the end of the story."

Longjam stopped, indicating the end of his narrative. But his audience looked uncertain. Then one girl raised her hand and said: "But please tell us what all happened last night! We all here love to read adventure stories and detective stories, but we don't get many books here in this remote village. If someone somehow gets his hold on such a book, it gets passed round the whole village. Everybody reads, adults and all! Even mothers. And now we have a real-life adventure of our own right here, right in our village. Please please tell us everything."

"OK, we will. We now turn to the actual events of last night." Jiyon took over where Longjam left off. "Inspector Ferdous took great personal risk himself by essentially serving as a decoy. And that plan worked indeed. For after a period of vigil the telltale flute was heard. The Songbird Tree seemed to be coming to life. A new, fully-formed branch seemed to be sprouting from the tree while swaying and wreathing. It was as Oldman Osman had described. We – Longjam and I – had entered the forest from the other village, and were lurking some distance away, watching the Inspector in the guise of Dipak Dastidar. We did not want to appear on the scene prematurely, and thus let whatever it was retreat.

"But then we saw the branch reach out to the Inspector and fell him with a sideways strike. We quickly moved in and dragged the Inspector far enough away that he would be safe. Then Longjam and I came and stood where he had earlier stood. Our first task was to observe this branch and understand what we were looking at. When it came close enough to us we shone the bright light from the hunting torch on its extremity. And the sight we saw was something that can make the blood run cold for even the bravest of men.

"There, waving its human head before us, was a phantasmagoric human-serpent. It was a woman who was a monstrous snake from neck down. We were looking straight at the woman's face. Then the branch swung away. It was only then that I realized that the face I saw was not that of a woman, but a little girl. And not just any girl, but the priest's daughter Lakshmi. So I made a quick mental calculation: First, there was nothing supernatural here. We had a serpent and we had a little girl, and together they had created the perfect illusion of a human-serpent. It was now easy to figure out that the girl had climbed into the snake's mouth wearing a snake camouflage suit up to her neck.

"My second thought was that we could not discharge our firearms with the little girl in the snake's mouth. So, even as the head was swinging back towards us, Longjam and I made a quick plan. When the head would swing round and back to us, Longjam would yank the girl out of the snake's mouth and take her out of harm's way so that I could tackle the snake. This part went well. But as soon as the snake's mouth was free it opened its jaws wide and turned to me. My blood curdled. In the light of the torch I was looking straight into the gate of hell. The pink flesh folds of the mouth were made most sinister by the white fangs that turned slightly inward. And I was looking right into the throat channel through which my head would be sliding down in a moment, even as I remained fully conscious of what was happening to me. Upon swallowing my head and shoulder, the snake's jaws would stretch and expand enormously around me and start to pull me in little by little.

"I mustered all the mental strength as I had never mustered before, and discharged a volley of No. 2 buckshot into the snake's mouth. For a moment the snake look stunned. It closed its jaws and started swinging to and fro. At this time Longjam came up on my left with his rifle at the ready. The snake's head was now moving so that when I next fired the slug – meant to be the final fatal shot – it missed the head completely. Suddenly now the snake's head jerked sideways and hit Longjam, who lost his balance and fell to the ground. His rifle was thrown clear. The snake's head was back in front of me. It was slightly lowered so that my eyes were now looking deep into the snake's eyes, from perhaps only a foot away.

"I cannot even begin to describe the evil I saw there. Deep in the depths of the eyes I saw a bluish glow that seemed to like the fire of hell. I think I literally saw this glow,

and was not imagining it. It physically paralyzed me completely. But I was conscious and could hear Longjam shout for me to get out of the way and give him a line of fire. But I could not move. The jaws would now start to close in on my head. Neither I nor Longjam had any weapons. We were done for.

"Then I heard six shots in rapid succession. Longjam had fired the Inspector's revolver which I had not known he had in his belt. He fired from his supine position in the ground in a two-handed grip. And I saw the snake's head turn to a lump from the impact of the large .455 caliber bullets. The head slowly fell to the ground. We thought it was over. Little did we realize what a giant python can do even in its death throes.

"Clearly, the priest was hiding in the forest and was watching the proceedings. Now, seeing the snake collapse, he lost his senses and came running out towards us, shouting: "What have you done to my girl?! What have you done to my girl?!"

"But he stumbled against he snake's body, and with lightning speed the snake coiled around him and squeezed. We could hear bones crack. His life of crime ended thus.

"The mystery of the flute became clear. It was a signal from Priest Rudra to Lakshmi to start the 'act', so to speak. The priest would be watching the scene from a vantage point, and when the time was right he would play his flute. Lakshmi, hiding with the snake in the canopy, would now start the snake on its way.

"So it seems that the python was housed partly in the garage and partly in the canopy. At the command from the priest or his daughter, it would come sliding down the outcrop along the smooth channel, and climb into the canopy. When it was planned to smoke the tree, the python somehow was in the canopy. So Priest Rudra cooked up the excuse of the religious rite and the auspicious morning hour just so he could move the snake during that night.

"A python this size probably needs to eat a small animal every couple of months. And that is why the two goats are missing.

"Also, a python cannot live without the proximity of natural water, and this is why the priest had to create the pond. "So that was the adventure!"

XIII. The Q&A Session

Even as Jiyon was finishing his account, there pulled up a vehicle and two uniformed police officers climbed out. Inspector Ferdous went to meet them. Jiyon now looked at his audience, hoping not to have to answer any questions. Inquisitive youngsters might ask probing questions into areas he did not want to go to. But a few hands went up. Jiyon smiled and looked at one of them.

One boy asked: "How does one become an adventurer?"

Jiyon had never considered that question, and did not know how to answer it. He decided to simply talk about himself.

"I don't know if there are prescribed ways of becoming an adventurer. But for Longjam and me, this is just an extension of our working life. We carve out roads and build bridges in remote places – hills, jungles, river deltas that are still pristine and untouched by man. When you do that for a long time, you become a part of it all. You face whatever comes your way, and sometimes strange things and events come your way. The only thing I can tell you is that a genuine love of outdoors is probably the beginning of a spirit of adventure."

Next question from a girl: "Can women become adventurers?"

"I don’t know any reason why not."

"But if a woman faced what you faced last night, would she be able to cope?"

"Perhaps yes, perhaps not. But she may have other strengths. She may not have made the mistakes we made, and thus not even be subjected to what we faced last night."

"What mistakes?!"

"Well, if we had put together everything we knew before last night in a calm and collected way, we could have figured out that it had to be a giant snake. Then we would have approached it in a more appropriately planned way."

Many hands were raised. Jiyon randomly picked one.

"So the ghost of the bungalow had nothing to do with anything? There was nothing about Priest Rudra’s settling in the bungalow, disturbing the spirit?"

"Look at it this way: If everything that happened can be explained in rational terms, then there is no need or cause to invoke a ghost."

The next question was what Jiyon was dreading.

"But is everything rationally explained? How did Baby Basu die in that haunted bungalow?"

The Morol stepped into the conversation. "Boys and girls, I will explain the rest to you latter. I see the officers are coming this way. Let us hear what they have to say."

XIV. Background story

Inspector Ferdous came and joined the gathering along with the two newcomers. He introduced them as officers of Chittagong Police. He then said: "I have briefed them on the happenings of last night. They in turn have some background information on Priest Rudra that they think they can share openly with all of us. So I give to you Inspector Sengupta."

The Chittagong police officer addressed the crowd. "We are sorry we did not arrive before these gentlemen went into the forest and confronted the evil. Because we could certainly have taken out much of the mystery surrounding this horror. Of course the elements of fear and danger would still have remained.

"The man you knew as Priest Rudra was actually Govinda Mandal. A priest he was not. He was not even a Brahmin. He hailed from Teknaf near the Burma border, as does his wife. She was of Arakan origin.

"This entire family – Govinda, his wife Soe Soe and daughter Lakshmi – they all worked for a traveling circus troupe. The wife worked as a cook. Govinda was a trainer for a 20 foot giant Burmese python. This was the central attraction of the circus, an act called The Phantasmagoric Serpent Girl. It attracted huge crowds who paid premium prices to watch the show. The little girl would wear a specially made suit of snake skin that covered her up to her neck line. She would then climb into the snake's mouth and the snake would swallow her up to her waist. Strapped to her shoulder were steel hooks that prevented the snake from accidentally swallowing the girl entirely. The overall look was that of a monster serpent with the head of a little girl. The illusion was actually perfect. Add to this the atmospherics – the stagecraft, the eerie lighting, the suspense music – and the result was spine-chilling. Even though everyone knew this was put on and that everyone was sitting in the safe midst of a huge crowd, everyone felt the horror. And to cap it all off, the show ended with a bright beam of light on the face which suddenly broke into a sweet smile.

"Now, a little over four months ago, there was a long bank holiday and a great deal of cash accumulated in the circus strongbox, from the box office receipts. Govinda planned to steal that night the entire strongbox and the snake, place them in the circus's specially made motorcycle-trailer for transporting the snake, and abscond

with his family. During the act, however, the manager woke up and confronted them. He would have overpowered Govinda had it not been for Soe Soe hitting him on the head with brick. The manager's skull was crushed. But he took a while to die, and was able to tell what had happened.

"We have been looking for the family ever since. And we had sent out telegraphic bulletins to the area police stations on the same day that Sub-Inspector Chaudhury came here.

"So it seems as though Govinda was hiding out here and was at the same time planning another caper. He would surely have left as soon as he had the money in his hands.

"Looking back, what was very effective make-believe horror in a circus setting had become a very effective true horror when placed in the natural setting. That had to be a most diabolical plan."

XV. Closure

About a month later Jiyon's work in Sylhet was finished, and he and Longjam were ready to drive back to Khulna. The annual Puja festivities were just ahead and the two friends were getting into a festive, euphoric frame of mind. The day before they would leave, a bright and sunny day with cirrus clouds signaling the Puja ahead, they decided to drive to Srimangal, pick up Inspector Ferdous if he would be available, and then visit Kakolimukhor.

On the way they stopped at a roadhouse for tea. As they were sitting out in the pleasurable sun and sipping tea, Longjam said: "Now that we are re-visiting the village, I want to sound you out on some issues there I am still not clear on."

"I think I have an idea what they are, but go on. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Well, nothing very concrete. It is just a feeling that not everything was tied up neatly. Even though the villagers may have accepted our story, do we really believe everything we told them?"

"Are you perhaps hinting that there was something supernatural there after all?"

"Well, let's consider a few points. First of all, your vivid description of the dark evil you saw in the python's eyes. You referred to a bluish glow deep in the depths of the serpent’s eyes that seemed like the fire of hell. Now, we are seasoned jungle-faring men. We know that the snake was just a cornered animal trying to protect itself from us and we were trying to protect ourselves from it. It is just the law of nature, the instinct of self-preservation. Just a hunting issue, as you said yourself that night. So how does the element of very dark evil come into this? I have never known you to be given to hyperbole.

"Second, those bloodhounds would surely not be spooked by the smell of an animal even if they had not smelled that animal before. There had to be more to this. Third, since those events we have found out from one of our laborers from Akyab that a Burmese python can go months without meal after eating a small animal. This python was fed two goats in four months. So it certainly would not have been ravenously hungry when it took Baby Basu. Why would it climb down from the tree and go after a human? What I mean is, was this really a case of transplanting a make-believe circus

horror into the jungle setting and thus making it into a stark terror, as Inspector Sengupta said, or was it something over and beyond this?"

"The latter, I think. It was almost as though something had happened to transform a trained and tamed circus snake into an evil creature. Beyond all your points, the snake also crushed its own long-time trainer to death. Pet animals usually do not do that. And then there is in mind this other gnawing issue: Why did the priest come to this particular place? But then it occurs to me that there were two obvious questions we never the Morol, because we did not think they were relevant. We were not allowing our minds to consider the supernatural. So we will ask those questions today."

Inspector Ferdous was in his office and readily agreed to join them. But he said he needed about half an hour to finish up some urgent work. In the meantime Jiyon and Longjam were served tea and an assortment of fine local sweets and piping hot samosas from the sweets shop next door to the police station.

When they arrived in the village, the village oval was full. Every villager turned up. They put up whatever colorful festoons they could improvise to create the atmosphere of a carnival. There was a big sign WELCOME SAVIOURS! made by the youngsters. Inspector Ferdous had conspired to send a messenger ahead to tell the villagers of the impending arrival of Jiyon and Longjam!

At the head of the welcoming party was the boy Rupak holding hands with the girl Lakshmi. The Morol explained that the two had become inseparable as though they were siblings, and that Rupak had fully recovered on his own. Behind them were the Basus, parents of Baby Basu. The Morol explained that the family was most happy to have adopted Lakshmi. There was some degree of closure. The Morol took them to one end of the village to show them the memorial grave to Oldman Osman. Then it was the short walk to the Songbird Tree. It looked perfectly peaceful and serene. They saw a brass plaque honoring Sub-Inspector Chaudhury near the altar. The birds were not there this time of day, but they indeed had returned in full force. The bungalow on the hilltop was going to seeds again.

Final goodbyes were said. The Morol accompanied the visitors on their way to the jeep. Jiyon saw the chance now and asked: "Morol, we never asked you this, but did the priest ever tell you why he chose this particular place to settle down?"

"As a matter of fact I was careful to ask him that before accepting him in our midst. And he gave an answer. He had entered East Bengal from Burma near Teknaf and proceeded north somewhat aimlessly, trying to decide where to settle down. One evening they decided to stop for the night near the Mainamati Ruins, about halfway between Chittagong and Srimangal. Then he went for a walk to stretch his cramped legs as his wife and daughter prepared the evening meal. There among the darkened ruins he came upon a sahib browsing. The priest was a little surprised to see anyone here after dusk, but the sahib explained that he was enjoying the ruins by moonlight. They struck up a conversation, with the priest asking the sahib for a good place to make home hereabouts. The sahib told him he knew exactly the place that would suit the priest, and gave him directions to the bungalow."

"And what exactly was the story of the haunting in that bungalow?"

The Morol was a little surprised at such questions at this stage – after the fact, so to speak. But he still replied quite fully. This is how the story went.

XVI. The blue fire

Some fifty years ago a sahib, a tea plantation owner, lived alone in the bungalow. He had a retinue of Indians, the 'natives', working in his house as servants, cooks, gardeners, water boys and so on. The sahib was a most vile and ill-tempered person and on top of all this, hated the natives with a passion. He seemed to derive great personal pleasure by torturing them at the slightest excuse. That included physical beatings and floggings and other forms of torture. Sometimes he brandished his gun and even fired over their heads. He such things on a daily basis, and the servants lived in abject fear. And yet they did not leave his employment because of the good salaries he paid and because he might ruin them if they did leave. Remember that this was still British India. No one could do anything about this.

One day the four-year old son of one of the servants ran up the hill to the bungalow to take his father home, because the mother had suddenly taken ill. When the sahib heard this, he said no way could the servant abandon his duties. Upon this the little boy, still panting from his run, continued his tearful supplication. The sahib flew into an insane rage. He was a huge man, and simply lifted the boy high up above his head and hurled him into the sloping outcrop. The boy was mangled to a most agonizing and slow death.

That night the natives organized. They knew the police would do nothing about the boy's death. So they pulled the sahib out of his bed and dragged him into the garage and tied him to a chair. Then they asked him if he was prepared to mend his ways. The sahib berated them most profanely. He said they were nothing more than beasts of burden to him. He said he would hand them all over to the police in the morning for assaulting him thus, reminding them that the Commissioner Sahib was his drinking mate. The servants then executed their plan. They placed near the sahib’s feet the basket they had borrowed from the local snake charmer. It had contained a yet undefanged keute saap, the highly poisonous krait.

They opened the lid and stepped back. The snake climbed up the sahib’s leg and up his torso. Then it sat coiled in his lap and unfurled its hood right in front of the sahib’s face. For a moment their eyes locked. The servants thought that in that moment they saw for the first time fear in the sahib’s eyes. With lightning speed the snake struck the sahib on the tip of his nose. Soon the sahib's body was writhing in

great agony. But even as he was dying, his promised his assailants that he would come back to teach them "an equal lesson – only many times magnified". As he said so, the servants could see the bluish flame of great hatred burning within the sahib’s clear blue eyes.

The sahib's pajama-clad body was placed back in his bed along with the snake which was killed without living any marks. The police concluded that the snake had ventured into the house, climbed into the warm bed and bit the sahib. A brave dying sahib then managed to squeeze the snake to death.

But the true story of the sahib's death spread among the locals as a whispered rumor. The legend developed then that the evil spirit of the owner was hanging around that bungalow, looking to possess a live body. Because of whiffs of this rumor no sahibs wanted to buy this property even at a nominal price, and the property became bewarish (ownerless) and went to seeds.

Tamam shud